

# Diego Garcia and the United States' Emerging Indian Ocean Strategy

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**Abstract:** *As the world's economic and strategic "center of gravity" shifts from the Euro-Atlantic area to the Asia-Pacific, the Indian Ocean is emerging as an increasingly critical trade and energy conduit. This region has long been a strategic backwater for the United States. Moreover, unlike in other critical subregions of Asia, the United States lacks significant host-nation bases and is unlikely to acquire them. The British territory of Diego Garcia, whose location and political reliability give it significant strategic utility, is thus central to US power projection in the Indian Ocean littoral region. The US military's approach to Diego Garcia reflects an implicit Indian Ocean strategy that seeks to establish a flexible and enduring presence within a critical and contested space. However, Washington needs to move toward an explicit Indian Ocean policy that views the region holistically rather than narrowly viewing separate US Pacific Command, US Central Command, and US Africa Command theaters.*

The United States faces a growing contradiction in some of the world's most strategically vital areas. The number of land-based US forces in the Middle East and South Asia is expected to shrink over time, even as counterinsurgency activities there remain a long-term priority.<sup>1</sup> Democratization within the region – a central goal of US military presence – may paradoxically force the departure of US forces from Iraq and Afghanistan and other nations undergoing political transition, even before these areas have stabilized.<sup>2</sup> A trend toward limited, low-profile bases is unlikely to solve this problem, since hosts may question US long-term commitments or demand “tacit or private goods, which risks future criticism and contractual renegotiation in the event of regime change.”<sup>3</sup> Yet, barring an unprecedented erosion of grand strategic ambitions, access to regional bases and other military facilities will be essential for American power projection and influence.

Maintaining US presence throughout the broader Indian Ocean littoral region depends on identifying enduring US interests in the region and developing a strategy to pursue those interests. According to Admiral Michael Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, US “strategy supports the development of a tailored posture in the broader Middle East and Central and South Asia, promotes a peaceful and stable Asia-Pacific region, and reaffirms our commitment to NATO and Europe.”<sup>4</sup> The

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The authors acknowledge with appreciation the constructive comments of Kent Calder, Alexander Cooley, Thomas Culora, Timothy Hoyt, Matthew Jenkinson, Cdr. James Kraska, USN, William Murray, Michael O'Hanlon, Andrew Winner, and Toshi Yoshihara, as well as two anonymous reviewers. Opinions and conclusions are solely those of the authors and in no way reflect the policies or estimates of the US military or any other organization of the US government.

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Indian Ocean, which is located adjacent to four of the regions identified by Mullen and a key transit route for goods and energy to the fifth, the Indian Ocean sits at the heart of this discussion. With the publication of the 2010 Quadrennial Defense Review and the impending release of the National Security Strategy and the new Unified Command Plan the Indian Ocean region has risen to the forefront of US strategic planning.

Although long considered a geopolitical backwater by US strategists, the Indian Ocean has assumed increasing importance in the past decade. While the United States lacks an explicit Indian Ocean strategy, many of the principles that guide its actions in the region are visible in the US military's treatment of the small British-owned island of Diego Garcia. The development of Diego Garcia reflects an overall strategy to establish a flexible and enduring presence within a critical and contested space. Moreover, the evolution of Diego Garcia as a forward-operating hub illustrates the trade-offs between political reliability and military utility that occur where uncontested access from well-located sites is in limited supply. The United States must reconcile such trade-offs in an effort to establish a functional network of assets from which to conduct planned and contingency operations.

Efforts to improve US access and capabilities in the region must be viewed in light of the political context of US regional engagement. To maximize the utility of its basing structure, the United States should work to maximize influence while minimizing host-nation political concerns. In addition, it is important for the United States to limit force structure costs while endeavoring to improve long-term stability. Each of these goals must also be accomplished by helping partners develop capacity while reducing their dependence on Washington. Out of the tensions inherent in those goals arises a suitable strategy: enable local partners to take the lead in various security tasks, yet retain specific "linchpin" capacities to influence regional security. Where possible, it makes sense to use host nation capabilities instead of an extended and expansive US presence that might alarm regional actors.

To remain actively engaged in shaping the security environment of the Indian Ocean region, forward-operating sites and cooperative security locations must be considered comprehensively as part of a strategy which focuses on developing a key node to which a number of other nodes are connected in a regional network. In contrast to the large US installations in Europe and the Western Pacific, nodes – those smaller bases that are spread throughout the region – assume a flexible character. Through the combined use of both major and minor support locations, the posture is broad based and tiered as a number of cooperative security locations are pinned together by several forward-operating sites. Key nodes are then placed in central, reliable locations, and have additional capabilities that are deemed unnecessary elsewhere.

Diego Garcia meets many of these criteria. The island facilitates US power projection throughout the Indian Ocean littoral by multiple means: the prepositioning of Army and Marine Corps brigade sets, long-range bomber operations, the replenishment of naval surface combatants, and the strike and special operations capabilities of guided-missile submarines (SSGN). The island's isolated location, on the sovereign territory of a close ally, reduces the facility's vulnerability to terrorist attacks and discord with the local population, which periodically plague many overseas bases. Moreover, Diego Garcia reduces the need for the US military to maintain a large footprint on the ground in order to protect America's regional allies, control the spread

of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction proliferation, and maintain the flow of energy and commerce through key chokepoints such as the straits of Hormuz and Malacca. These regional objectives can be achieved by engaging in an offshore balancing posture that maintains local preeminence via control of the sea. As a result, air and naval platforms, as well as rapidly deployable special operations forces, staged “over the horizon” at Diego Garcia, can enable the US to pursue its regional interests with a less provocative and less visible presence.

This article draws on interviews with US government officials, newly available archival documents, and academic and media sources in multiple languages. Our analysis proceeds in four sections. The first section examines the emerging strategic importance of the Indian Ocean littoral. The second, and most extensive, section concentrates on American interests in the Indian Ocean and surveys the history and development of the American presence on Diego Garcia as part of an expeditionary, networked basing strategy in the region. From this detailed examination of Diego Garcia, the ongoing, indirect development of an informal US Indian Ocean strategy is identified. A third section examines India and China’s interests and activities in the region. The final section assesses the likelihood of great-power cooperation in the region, suggests how the US might best develop and maintain basing and access there, and underscores the need for the further development of a US regional strategy.

### **A Contested Space**

Stretching from the Persian Gulf and the coast of East Africa to the Malay Archipelago and the shores of Australia, the Indian Ocean covers more than 28 million square miles. The 30 nations that constitute its littoral region contain one-third of the world’s population. Rich in natural resources, this geographical space contains 62 percent of the world’s proven oil reserves, 35 percent of its gas, 40 percent of its gold, 60 percent of its uranium, and 80 percent of its diamonds.<sup>5</sup> In addition, littoral areas abound with other important minerals and industrial raw materials, including iron, titanium, chromate, lithium, bauxite, cobalt, nickel, manganese, rubber, and tin.<sup>6</sup> The Indian Ocean is also a vital conduit for bringing those materials to market. Most notably, it is a key transit route for oil from the Persian Gulf to reach consumers in Europe and Asia. Seventeen million barrels of oil a day (20 percent of the world’s oil supply and 93 percent of oil exported from the Gulf) transits by tanker through the Strait of Hormuz and into the western reaches of the Indian Ocean.<sup>7</sup> Although large amounts of oil reach Europe and the Americas via the Suez Canal and the Cape of Good Hope, the more important route is eastward, as Gulf oil provides nearly 75 percent of Asia’s import needs.<sup>8</sup> Such is the importance of this route that some commentators have termed it the “new silk road.”<sup>9</sup> Japan’s economy is almost totally dependent on Gulf oil, with 89 percent of its imports shipped via the Indian Ocean, while Asia’s two rising powers, China and India, are also increasingly reliant on oil transiting the region. At present, more than 89 percent of China’s hydrocarbon imports come via the Indian Ocean, while Gulf oil will soon account for 90 percent of India’s imports.<sup>10</sup>

In terms of global trade, the Indian Ocean is a major conduit linking manufacturers in East Asia to markets in Europe, Africa, and the Persian Gulf. In addition to more than two-thirds of the world’s oil shipments, half of the world’s containerized cargo and one-third of its bulk cargo travels the ocean’s busy sea lanes annually.<sup>11</sup>

The Asia-Europe shipping route, via the Indian Ocean, has recently displaced the transpacific route as the world's largest containerized trading lane.<sup>12</sup>

For these reasons, the region has assumed tremendous strategic significance. Indeed, Robert Kaplan argues that the Indian Ocean is a key geographic space which melds energy, commerce, and security.<sup>13</sup> Continued economic growth in both the developed and developing world depends, in part, on uninterrupted access to the Indian Ocean littoral's oil and mineral resources and the goods that transit it – particularly because 80 percent of the trade conducted across the Indian Ocean is extraregional.<sup>14</sup> Political and military developments which adversely affect the flow of oil, raw materials, or trade goods could impact the world's major economies. Consequently, regional security in the Indian Ocean can be of vital interest for the countries of the immediate littoral and beyond.

This poses a particular concern as the Indian Ocean littoral is a fragile part of the world, spanning a great proportion of what Thomas Barnett has termed “the Non-Integrating Gap.”<sup>15</sup> This region has a high potential for producing dysfunctional polities: *Foreign Policy* magazine's 2010 index of failed states included nine littoral states in its top 25.<sup>16</sup> Moreover, the potential for interstate conflict remains high, as many states have unresolved maritime or territorial disputes in a region that lacks substantial collective security arrangements.

The particular geography of the ocean itself, which is bounded on almost all sides by the narrow chokepoints of the Straits of Malacca to the east and the Suez Canal, Cape of Good Hope, and Straits of Hormuz to the west, imposes challenges to maritime security. As several maritime analysts have noted, “If there was ever a case to be made for the relevance of strategic chokepoints, it is here, at the aquatic juncture between the world's largest sources of petroleum and the world's most import- and export-dependent economies.”<sup>17</sup> Not only are ships in these narrow sea lanes vulnerable to attack, but control of these bottlenecks has been the key to dominating the ocean since the Portuguese first arrived in the fifteenth century.

In addition to conventional security challenges, the littoral is plagued by a host of irregular security threats. A syndicate of violent extremist networks, including al-Qaeda and associated movements, operates from poorly governed spaces. While maritime trade routes are at risk from piracy on the high seas, the very same waterways that transport goods are also used for human smuggling, drug trafficking, and gun running, as well as proliferation of munitions between and among insurgent groups. The Tamil Tigers in Sri Lanka, for example, were able to sustain themselves primarily by sea – shipping weapons from Southeast Asia to their liberated zones in the north – and were only defeated after their maritime supply chain was broken.

Finally, the region also has the potential to be the scene for great power conflict. In the context of the simultaneous rise of both India and China, Kaplan argues that “the Indian Ocean is where global struggles will play out in the 21st century.”<sup>18</sup> It is not an exaggeration to suggest that the Indian Ocean littoral could be pivotal geopolitically. Any country that were to exercise a dominant role in the northern Indian Ocean would have the ability to affect the oil and trade routes from the Middle East to Europe and Asia – and thereby exercise negative influence over the industrialized world. As the world's strategic center of gravity shifts from the Euro-Atlantic region

to the Asia-Pacific, therefore, the Indian Ocean is increasingly seen as “the ocean of destiny in the 21st century.”<sup>19</sup>

### **The United States and the Indian Ocean**

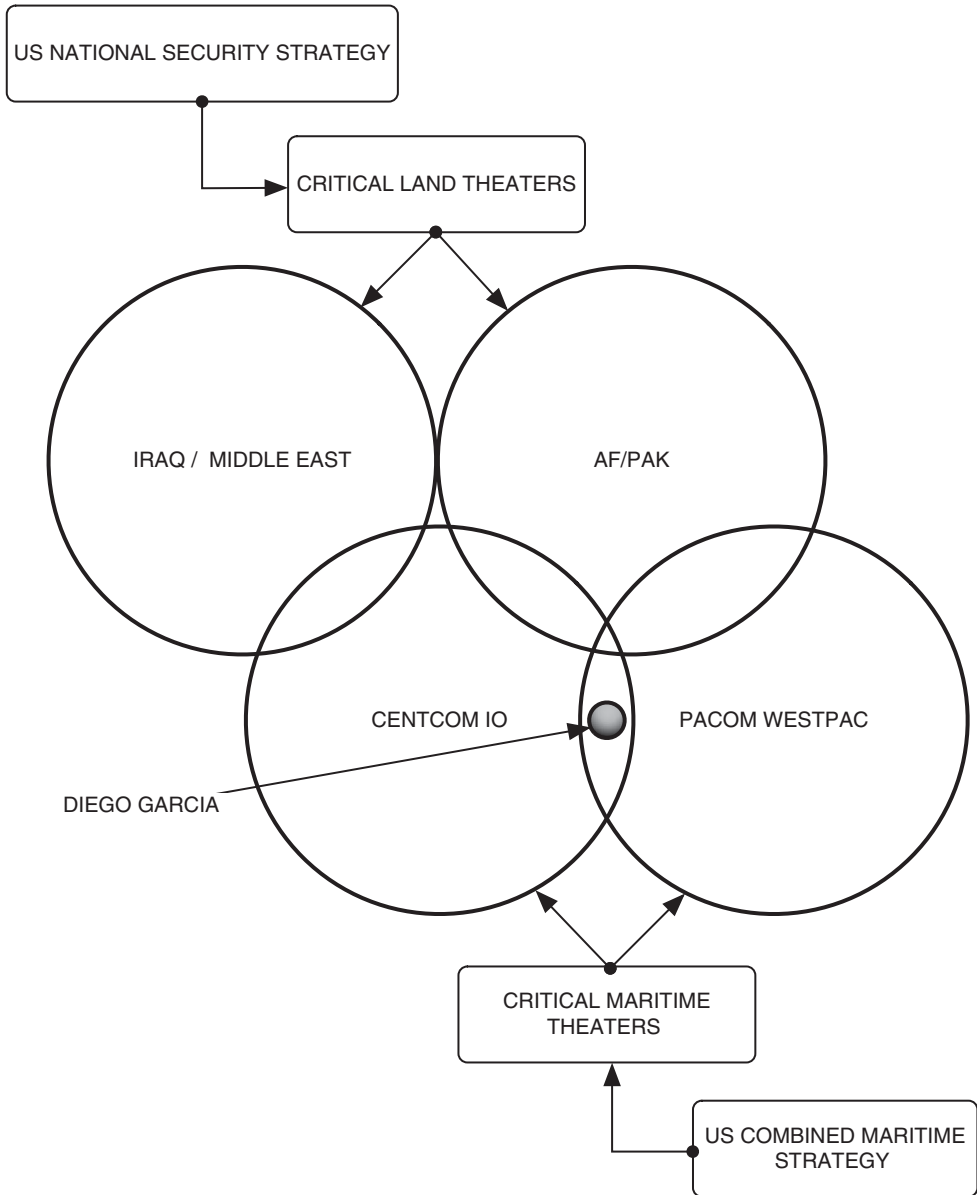
As outlined by Christopher Layne, US strategic priorities since the end of the Second World War have been to prevent the emergence of a rival hegemon in Europe or Asia while guaranteeing order in key areas of the periphery – most notably the Persian Gulf.<sup>20</sup> In this light, developments in the Indian Ocean are of importance to the United States as they affect the achievement of these broader goals. Among Washington’s most significant concerns are the need to secure the sea lines of communication (SLOC) that transit the region, the desire to prevent a hostile power from dominating the littoral, and the imperative to disrupt the operations of al-Qaeda-affiliated groups.

Indeed, as Figure 1 demonstrates, the Indian Ocean region links the land and maritime theaters that most concern American strategic thinkers. The US National Security Strategy identifies two land theaters of vital interest: Iraq and the greater Middle East and Afghanistan/Pakistan.<sup>21</sup> Similarly, the US Maritime Strategy identifies the Western portion of the Indian Ocean, which includes the piracy-plagued Horn of Africa, as well as the Western Pacific as theaters of vital interest.<sup>22</sup> At the intersections of these critical theaters, the US must address a paradox: Presence is needed to create stable political conditions, but that same presence often upsets the very populations and disturbs the very political environment whose amelioration was the objective in the first place. The United States, then, has a strong interest in developing influence in the region without engendering a backlash that would jeopardize that influence.

As the world’s largest economy, the United States is concerned with the security of the ships that transit the Indian Ocean to bring goods and energy to market. Twenty-two percent of America’s oil imports and more than 50 strategic minerals on which the United States relies come from or transit the littoral region.<sup>23</sup> Although the United States itself is not significantly dependent on the region for access to hydrocarbons, many of the United States’ allies and key trading partners in Asia are. Several of America’s major allies in Asia, such as Japan, South Korea, Thailand, and the Philippines, as well as important regional partners like India and Singapore, are heavily dependent on the energy flows transiting the Indian Ocean. This is also true of key trading partners such as China, Japan, and South Korea, which collectively account for more than 20 percent of all US trade by value.<sup>24</sup> Because the market for hydrocarbons is global, a supply disruption anywhere will affect the world price for oil and gas. The requirements of trade and energy thus make the continued free passage of shipping through the Indian Ocean of supreme importance for Washington. The need for maintaining free passage and good order at sea extends beyond the commercial domain as Indian Ocean chokepoints are an important means by which the United States can quickly move its naval forces between the European, Central, and Pacific Command areas of responsibility.

As a result, the United States has an interest in preventing the emergence of a hostile regional power that could threaten the flow of commodities in the region.<sup>25</sup> To the West, an increasingly belligerent Iran straddles the Strait of Hormuz, the world’s

FIGURE 1  
THE INDIAN OCEAN LINKS US LAND AND MARITIME THEATERS OF INTEREST.



most important maritime chokepoint. Iran's ability to employ sea mines, antiship cruise missiles, and attack submarines (many of the first two items purchased from China) has provoked concern about potential threats to navigation in the Arabian Sea.<sup>26</sup> Moreover, in the context of the ongoing dispute over Iran's nuclear program, Tehran conducted a series of naval maneuvers in 2006 that appeared to be intended to signal its ability to

block the Straits of Hormuz in a crisis.<sup>27</sup> At the same time, from Southeast Asia to the coast of East Africa, China has increased its extraregional presence and political influence in its quest for energy. There is widespread speculation that Beijing is cultivating an informal set of access rights to local ports which could increase the Chinese navy's ability to project power into the littoral.<sup>28</sup> Although Chinese expeditionary naval capability remains limited, the mismatch between expressed concerns over the security of energy flows through regional chokepoints and its actual behavior bears monitoring. Should one or both of these nations achieve a more influential role in the littoral, it could have significant implications for US strategic interests.

Finally, US interests in the region are also conditioned by the fact that the littoral has been ground zero for its nearly decade-long "war on terror." Prior to September 11, 2001, the United States was the victim of al-Qaeda-backed terrorist attacks in Kenya, Tanzania, and Yemen. Today, the United States and its allies are conducting military operations against Islamic extremists in the East African, Central Asian, and Southeast Asian subregions that adjoin the Indian Ocean. Given its location at an intersection of two main reservoirs of Islamic extremism, the Middle East and Southeast Asia, one commentator has branded the Indian Ocean a "lake of Jihadi terrorism."<sup>29</sup> Al-Qaeda has repeatedly proclaimed its desire to cripple the West economically by targeting the oil-rich Gulf sheikdoms in the western reaches of the Indian Ocean that are friendly to the United States. In the past decade, agents acting in its name have targeted US civilian and military entities in Yemen, Jordan, Bahrain, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the Straits of Hormuz, and the Strait of Malacca.

The Indian Ocean littoral is thus an increasingly important part of the world and developments there affect American interests ranging from energy to trade to security. Although key US interests, both political and economic, are only indirectly influenced by regional developments, the globalized nature of financial and commodity markets ensure that major tremors in the Indian Ocean would soon be felt in America. Moreover, American naval analysts have recently noted, "As the world's greatest trading nation, the U.S. economy . . . would not be so prosperous or dynamic were American or foreign-flagged shipping unable to use the world's oceans at will, free from restriction and interference."<sup>30</sup> In recognition of the importance of this region to US interests, the 2007 US maritime strategy reorients the Navy and Marine Corps from their traditional two-ocean focus on the Atlantic and the Pacific to the Indian Ocean and the Pacific, thereby declaring the intent to maintain sufficient forces in these regions to deter or defeat any hostile power.<sup>31</sup>

As an extraregional power without revisionist territorial ambitions, the United States can play a key role in managing stability in the region, be it leading multilateral efforts to respond to irregular security threats, such as piracy, or preventing the escalation of interstate conflict to dangerous levels. To achieve its regional objectives, the United States does not require a major ongoing military commitment to the Indian Ocean; rather, regular military deployments, coupled with the ability to surge forces into the area during a crisis, would provide the ability to deter most threats to US interests there. These factors combine to make the centrally positioned island of Diego Garcia "one of the most strategic American bases in the world."<sup>32</sup>

### **Diego Garcia and the United States' Emerging Indian Ocean Strategy**

The United States has not traditionally possessed an integrated strategy for the Indian Ocean littoral. Instead, ad-hoc responses to emerging challenges have characterized its regional approach. In this extended section, the authors argue that an emerging regional strategy can be detected inductively via an analysis of the microdevelopments on Diego Garcia.

US involvement in the Indian Ocean took shape in the 1960s and 1970s as Britain's withdrawal from the region it had traditionally policed appeared to coincide with increased Soviet presence in East Africa and South Asia. In the early 1960s, elements within the US Navy recognized the need to acquire an Indian Ocean logistics base to facilitate local contingency operations. Requirements included a communications station for ships and aircraft in the area, an airfield capable of hosting long-range reconnaissance aircraft, and a supply depot that could sustain a US naval presence on a site that was relatively unpopulated and free from political restrictions on its use.

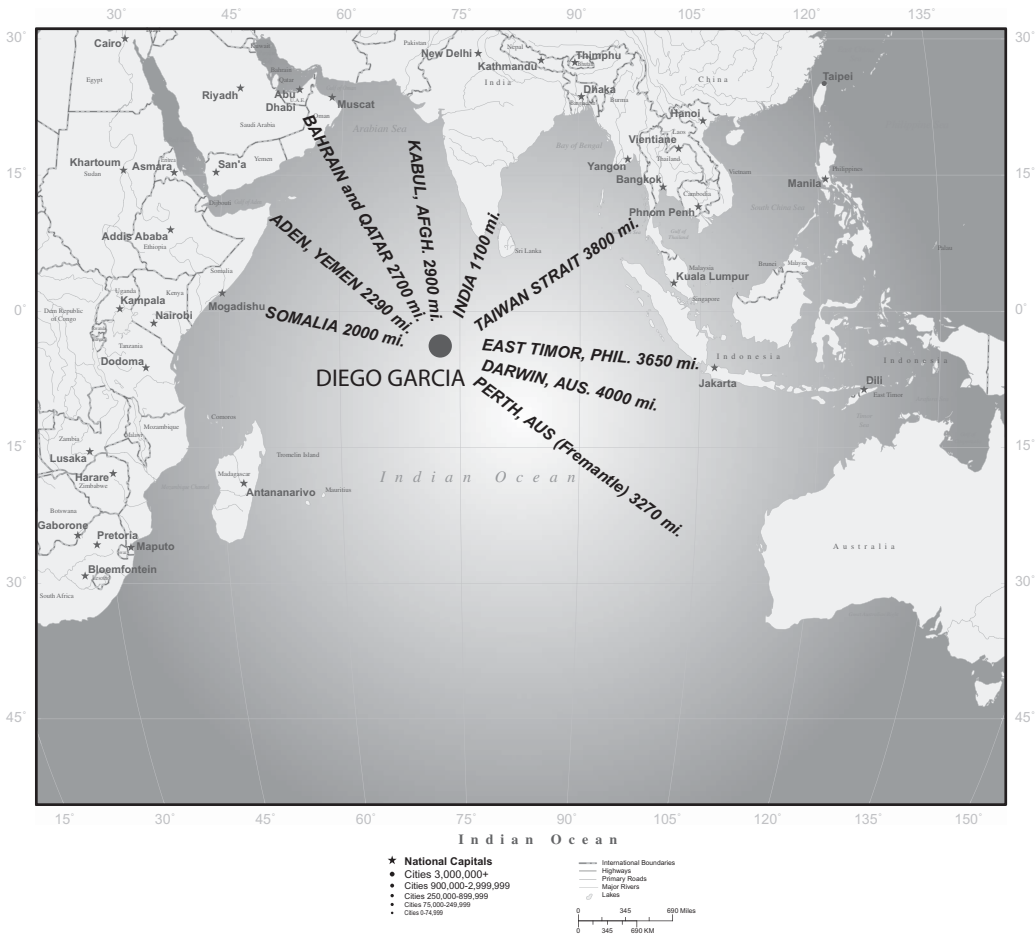
As Third World nationalism inflamed the Indian Ocean region in the wake of decolonization, the Navy recognized the vulnerability of shore-based facilities to popular opinion in the host nation. Lightly populated islands, by contrast, could be relatively free of political protests, especially against the presence of foreign bases. As part of the "strategic island concept," therefore, naval strategists advocated securing basing rights on strategically located and "sparsely populated islands."<sup>33</sup>

Among the foremost "strategic islands" identified by naval analysts was the British-held territory of Diego Garcia.<sup>34</sup> Named after the Portuguese navigator who discovered the uninhabited atoll in 1532, Diego Garcia is the largest of seven islands that constitute the Chagos archipelago. Located in the center of the Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia is approximately 970 nautical miles south of India, 925 nautical miles southwest of Sri Lanka, 2,200 nautical miles southeast of the Strait of Hormuz, and roughly 1,600 nautical miles from the mouth of the Strait of Malacca. More significantly, the atoll abuts all major shipping lanes that reticulate the Indian Ocean. As Admiral John McCain noted, "As Malta is to the Mediterranean, Diego Garcia is to the Indian Ocean – equidistant from all points."<sup>35</sup> The island itself consists of a wishbone-shaped coral atoll, 14 miles long and 4 miles wide, which surrounds "one of the finest natural harbors in the world."<sup>36</sup> For a map of the Indian Ocean region and Diego Garcia's position therein, see Figure 2.

Because Diego Garcia was also seen as a potential base for British military presence in the Indian Ocean should London lose access to Aden or Singapore, Washington initiated talks with London in the early 1960s about the establishment of a shared Anglo-American defense facility on Diego Garcia.<sup>37</sup> As Britain's Indian Ocean colonies approached independence, London persuaded the government of Mauritius to surrender its claim to the Chagos Archipelago, for which it was compensated \$8.4 million.<sup>38</sup> In November 1965, this island chain was subsequently combined with three islands that had been detached from the Seychelles to form the new crown colony of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT). An Exchange of Notes between the United States and the United Kingdom in December of the following year made the entire BIOT available "for the defense purposes of both governments as they may arise."<sup>39</sup>



FIGURE 2  
DIEGO GARCIA IN THE INDIAN OCEAN.



Though ideal in many respects, and never self-governing at any time in history, at the time of the creation of the BIOT, Diego Garcia had a population of 483 men, women, and children, all but 7 of whom were employees of or dependents on the copra plantations owned by the Seychelles-based Chagos-Agalega Company.<sup>40</sup> Both the British and American governments believed that establishing defense facilities on the island would require closing the existing copra plantations and resettling the workers and their families.<sup>41</sup> After the formation of the BIOT, the government of Mauritius informed its nationals working in the Chagos Archipelago that they should seek alternative employment.<sup>42</sup> It was hardly an exceptional practice to close plantations and transfer workers – the copra plantations on three other islands in the Chagos Archipelago were closed during the interwar period and their employees relocated.<sup>43</sup> From 1965–71, the Chagos-Agalega Company ceased renewing work contracts for existing employees and natural attrition took its toll; by the time the plantations

stopped operating in 1971, only 359 inhabitants remained on the atoll.<sup>44</sup> The Chagos-Agalega Company evacuated the remaining civilian population of Diego Garcia by ship to Mauritius, and the British government paid the Mauritian government a total of \$8.6 million to cover their resettlement.<sup>45</sup>

Construction commenced on an austere communications facility and an 8,000-foot runway in March 1971. The development of military infrastructure on Diego Garcia occurred at a dynamic time for the Indian Ocean littoral. With the withdrawal of all British forces from the Far East and Persian Gulf largely completed by 1971, the Soviet navy began regular Indian Ocean deployments and soon after concluded a strategic partnership with India. In response, the United States undertook a “major shift” in its regional strategy, significantly increasing the frequency of its naval patrols in the Indian Ocean. A further pair of Anglo-American agreements saw Diego Garcia upgraded from a “limited communications facility” to a “support facility of the U.S. Navy,” complete with “an anchorage, airfield, associated logistics support and supply and personnel accommodations.”<sup>46</sup> This, as one scholar notes, was “a diplomatic euphemism for a full-scale American naval/air base.”<sup>47</sup>

The need for such a facility in the region was underscored in the late 1970s as revolution convulsed Iran and the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan. With the Shah's overthrow, the United States lost a key security buffer between the Soviet Union and the Gulf as well as access to the strategically located Iranian ports of Bandar Abbas and Chah Bahar at a time when Soviet involvement was already increasing in the Middle East and the Horn of Africa. In the early 1980s, the atoll became the home for 13 of the Marine Corps' near-term prepositioning ships, which carried equipment, ammunition, and fuel sufficient to outfit a mechanized Marine Amphibious Brigade. The Army soon followed suit, establishing 12 afloat prepositioning ships of its own.<sup>48</sup> The further extension of the island's airfield and upgrade of its communications suite allowed the temporary basing of long-range bombers. The improvement of Diego Garcia's facilities and the prepositioning of military equipment also significantly enhanced America's capability to project power into the Indian Ocean littoral and assume a more active role in the region's affairs.

### *Diego Garcia in Context*

Diego Garcia is a component of a larger network of overseas bases – and offers specific capabilities that strategists value, chief among those a place in theater to service and temporarily position equipment. The atoll of Diego Garcia serves four primary functions:

1. **One-third of the entire US Afloat Prepositioning Force occupies the lagoon.** The US military maintains stocks of equipment such as tanks, armored infantry fighting vehicles, fuel, munitions, and spare parts on prepositioned ships at Diego Garcia. These vital strategic assets provide Washington with tremendous crisis-response capability, enabling both an Army and a Marine Corps brigade to mobilize within 24 hours, position assets anywhere within the theater in a week, and operate without additional support for up to 30 days.<sup>49</sup> These prepositioned stocks were called upon

during the buildup for the 1991 Gulf War, in 2003 to equip brigades for Operation Iraqi Freedom, and throughout Operation Enduring Freedom (2001 to present).

2. **Fast-attack submarines and surface ships call on the deep draft wharf.** The naval facility provides units throughout the region with fuel, food, spare parts, munitions, and maintenance services. The atoll also acts as a gateway for ships in transition between theaters to rest, fix equipment, and train for new missions. Diego Garcia serves as a place to exchange SSGN crews and thus supports a limited degree of “sea basing.”<sup>50</sup> A prime example of the island’s role as logistics hub is its support of more than two dozen US Navy ships currently operating in the Northern Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf, some of which are involved in ongoing counterpiracy operations.
3. **Its airfield can support tactical and long-range aircraft.** The atoll helps to enable the US Strategic Command’s Global Strike concept, which seeks the ability to attack targets at any point on earth with conventional weapons.<sup>51</sup> During the 1991 Gulf War, B-52s based on the atoll carried out more than 600 sorties.<sup>52</sup> It also supported subsequent strikes on Iraq in 1996 (Desert Strike) and 1998 (Desert Fox). B-1s and B-52s based at Diego Garcia conducted the majority of sorties during Operation Enduring Freedom, accounting for 65 percent of all ordnance dropped on Afghanistan.<sup>53</sup> In 2003, the airstrikes that attempted to decapitate Saddam Hussein’s regime at the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom were launched from the atoll. More recently, the atoll also served as a key transit point for the evacuation of 550 metric tons of uranium from the Iraqi nuclear complex at Tuwaitha.<sup>54</sup>
4. **A telecommunications station tracks satellites and relays fleet broadcasts to units in the area.**<sup>55</sup> Such shore relay stations serve a critical function in the US military’s worldwide communications effort: Joint operations in the Indian Ocean rely upon secure tactical communications circuits maintained by shore radio operators at Diego Garcia. The station also plays an important signals intelligence function, monitoring and intercepting communications from across the littoral region, whether “Indian or Pakistani nuclear intentions or terrorist travels.”<sup>56</sup> Finally, Diego Garcia hosts one of the nine tracking stations that the US Air Force uses to command military satellites and one of the five ground antennas supporting the operation of the Global Positioning System.

### *Ongoing Upgrades*

Diego Garcia is currently undergoing a \$200 million expansion of the island’s capabilities – comparable to the effort in the early 1970s that transformed the island from a simple communications facility to its present role as an important support facility in the Indian Ocean.<sup>57</sup>

The most significant recent infrastructure improvements permit the island to: (1) host a nuclear-powered SSGN for limited repairs and extended crew rest, and (2) pending an agreement with the United Kingdom, act as the homeport for the submarine tender USS *Emory S. Land*, recently relocated from La Maddalena, Italy.<sup>58</sup>

A single SSGN combines the cruise missile firepower of a carrier strike group with the underwater persistence of a nuclear platform. This allows an SSGN to remain undetected off a coastline for long periods to be in a position to strike targets of opportunity

as needed. Capable of housing up to 66 Navy SEALs in alternate configurations, the SSGN can also facilitate the conduct of special operations missions against targets of interest throughout the region. In support of the Combined Joint Task Forces off the coasts of Somalia or Yemen, for example, an SSGN could insert special forces covertly, strike targets they identify, and then extract them upon completion of a mission, all while submerged.

The *Emory S. Land*, one of the navy's two submarine tenders, serves as a floating shipyard to repair and supply submarines and surface ships. Specialized personnel can provide virtually any repair service the tended ship requests, and the tender can also accept transfer of radioactive and hazardous materials that accumulate on nuclear-powered boats during long periods at sea. Currently, USS *Frank Cable*, the only other submarine tender in the US fleet, rotates between Guam and Diego Garcia. Without the tender in theater, if critical equipment breaks during a mission in the Indian Ocean, either (1) the item remains out of commission until the damaged ship transits the Suez Canal and visits the tender at its Mediterranean location, or (2) a fly-away team attempts to restore or replace the item in Bahrain or Diego Garcia. Neither repair scenario is ideal: One requires a lengthy and expensive transit of the Suez that would preclude follow-on tasking in the region, and the other limits the repair team's immediately available resources. Similarly, a tender at Diego Garcia means that a Tomahawk-capable unit that has launched a full salvo no longer has to transit the Suez to the Mediterranean to reload.

#### *Merits and Uncertainties*

A discussion of the relative merits of Diego Garcia as a base exemplifies the deliberations surrounding many other forward-operating locations: to achieve gains in one area, it is frequently necessary to compromise in another. This is particularly true of two essential features of forward-support locations, which are difficult to optimize simultaneously – close proximity to areas of interest and political reliability.

The US Joint Chiefs of Staff recently underscored the importance of dependable forward-support locations where “combat power can be selectively and rapidly repositioned to meet contingencies that may arise elsewhere.”<sup>59</sup> The frequent shifting of air assets for use in the US Central Command Theater serves as a cautionary example of the unpredictability of strategic basing partnerships in the greater Middle East. The former Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia had been constructed at a cost of \$1.07 billion to assist with Operation Southern Watch over Iraq. Responding to sensitivity on the part of Riyadh in the build-up to the start of Operation Iraqi Freedom in March 2003, the United States shifted air operations to Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. In 2005, the expeditionary air wing composed of B-1 and B-2 bombers then operating from Diego Garcia also relocated to Al Udeid after the United States received repeated assurances from the Qatari government about access to the facility. Since that time, Al Udeid has assumed greater importance and received additional investment from the United States and Qatar. However, US-Qatari relations are complicated by Qatar's complex relationship with Iran; should tensions escalate between the United States and Iran, Qatar would be placed in a difficult position. This underscores the need for an adaptable force posture based on reliable access.

Concern about the political reliability of overseas access points also extends to treaty allies. Alexander Cooley argues persuasively that this is because “U.S. basing presence means different things to different actors” and that “these views, even for the same actor, vary considerably over time.”<sup>60</sup> Specifically, “changes in a host country’s domestic political institutions . . . independently affect the types of benefits that elites can derive from the base issue. . . . Certain political environments, especially periods of volatile democratic transition, afford considerable political benefits to elites who contest basing agreements.”<sup>61</sup> Kent Calder demonstrates further that the increasingly decentralized domestic political underpinnings of host nation bases are likely to make available compensatory approaches to securing access more complex, difficult, and mutually unpalatable in the future.<sup>62</sup> Of note in this regard, local political pressure forced the shuttering of the *Emory S. Land*’s homeport on the Italian island of Sardinia. The sudden, unexpected base closure at La Maddalena reinforces concerns that “guaranteed access” is a chimera – even in otherwise-reliable NATO allies.<sup>63</sup> Local concerns, often manipulated for local political gain, can escalate into unfavorable domestic political conditions that can unhinge the strongest of basing agreements.<sup>64</sup>

The decision to transfer the *Emory S. Land* to Diego Garcia is therefore a significant acknowledgement of the atoll’s strategic location and politically favorable situation. Only basic amenities now exist on the island, but commanders *can* count on them. For both routine and contingency operations, sparse but dependable resources are preferred to better developed but unreliable ones. The island contains only one runway, one deep-draft quay wall, and a small petrol pier, far less than required for a significant buildup of material for a major military engagement; however, should the need arise to surge units and equipment to the area, commanders could expect to use Diego Garcia without delay.

Diego Garcia is not completely devoid of access challenges. One future concern relates to the rights of the former copra plantation workers and their descendants to return to the Chagos Archipelago. In the past decade, several legal challenges have been mounted to the lawfulness of the population’s original evacuation, with the plaintiffs seeking both further compensation and a right of return. In 2006 and 2007, British courts ruled that the government had wrongly barred the former inhabitants from returning to the archipelago, while upholding the restricted status of Diego Garcia. In 2008, the House of Lords, the United Kingdom’s highest court of appeal, overturned these previous rulings by finding that the plaintiffs had no right of abode in the Chagos Archipelago.<sup>65</sup> While this would appear to settle the issue within the British legal system, there is speculation that the case will be raised before the European Court of Human Rights, which could take a more liberal view of the plaintiff’s case. Although it is unlikely that a civilian population would ever be reintroduced to Diego Garcia proper, it would be wise for the United States to make contingency plans for the possibility that some of the other islands in the archipelago, specifically the Peros Banos and Salomon atolls approximately 150 miles away, will become inhabited at some point in the future.<sup>66</sup>

Aside from the exiled plantation workers, the most likely candidate to reclaim territory on Diego Garcia is the sea itself. The island’s Northwest shore has proven vulnerable to erosion, and its low elevation complicates efforts to protect it from the threat

of rising sea levels. Ironically, the potential dangers of climate change added justification to the 2008 UK Law Lords' decision to deny permanent resettlement on the atoll.<sup>67</sup> The uncertain future effects of climate change on the island, therefore, may add certainty to the legal dispute over claims to it. Among the environmental challenges to Diego Garcia, only the short-term impact of erosion has been fully accounted for in annual planning, with the island's 40 construction battalion personnel placing imported rocks in rotating locations to protect nearby personnel berthing and water treatment plants.<sup>68</sup> Although the long-term impact of climate change to the island remains uncertain, the resident British climate change expert, Dr. Charles Shepard, recently called rising sea levels a "major concern" for Diego Garcia.<sup>69</sup> As part of construction planning, both the United States and the United Kingdom should undertake a more thorough study of the long-term feasibility of continued defense presence on the archipelago.

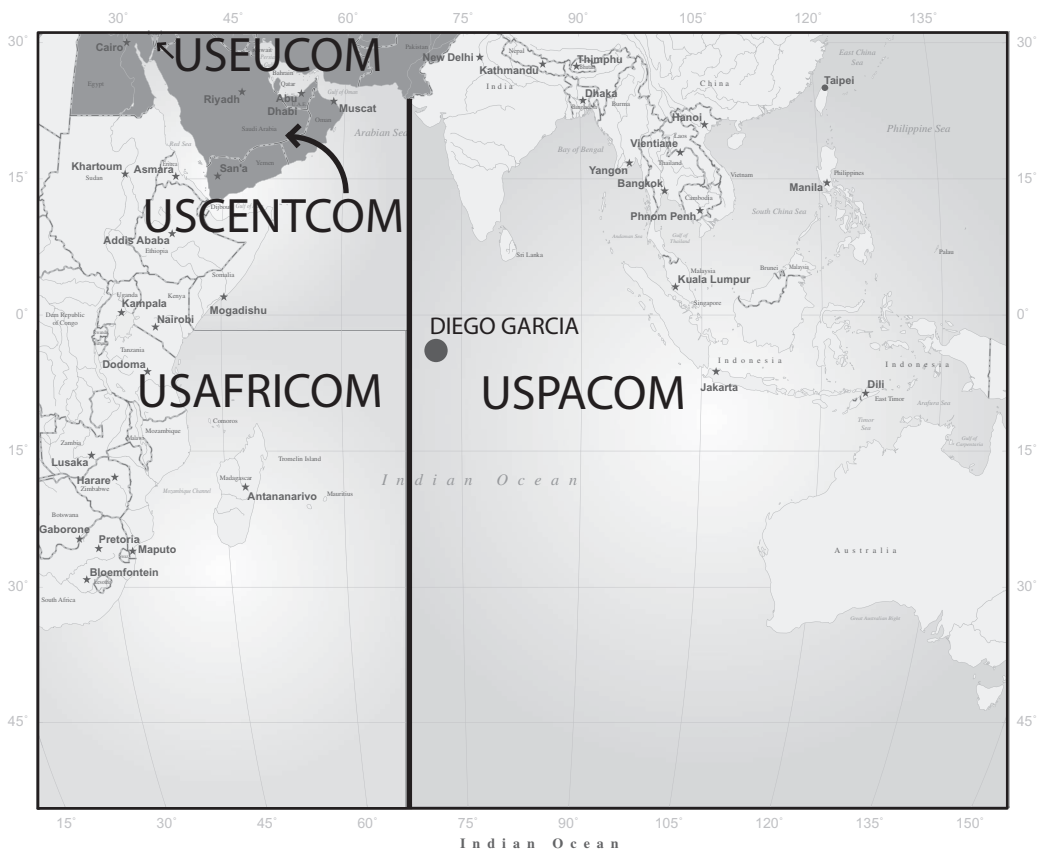
The "tyranny of distance" both adds to and detracts from Diego Garcia's value. The atoll's location, while central to the Indian Ocean, remains significantly far from the coast of East Africa, South Asia, or the Arabian Peninsula. The contradiction between the location and reliability of regional bases can be resolved by focusing on the defining characteristics of the current threat environment. Terrorists groups inhabit a diverse group of regional states and communicate in broad geographic networks. Localized threats appear fleetingly, disperse, and regroup. Political relationships in the area remain equally unpredictable, and permanent US bases are an anathema to many regional governments and electorates alike. In this context, a high priority must be placed on *assured access* to regional bases.

The United States has continued to invest in Diego Garcia under the logic that if one cannot predict which area of interest will require military forces, one should concentrate on the center. In this way, quasi-sovereign access to Diego Garcia remains critical to continued US operations in the region. What the island lacks in proximity to critical zones, it makes up for in political reliability. National security analyst John Pike regards Diego Garcia as "the single most important military facility [that the United States has]." In his view, "it's the base from which [the United States] control[s] half of Africa and the southern side of Asia, the southern side of Eurasia," as well as "the facility that at the end of the day gives [the United States] some say-so in the Persian Gulf region. If it didn't exist, it would have to be invented." In Pike's assessment, it is the goal of the US military to "be able to run the planet from Guam and Diego Garcia by 2015, even if the entire Eastern Hemisphere" has evicted US forces from other bases there.<sup>70</sup>

Although Pike certainly embellishes Diego Garcia's importance, his underlying logic holds. While the atoll remains thousands of miles from any one area of interest, it is central to many. The island's utility in a regional contingency was established during Operation Desert Storm, where "prepositioning allowed for a more rapid response by combat forces to the theater, providing essential supplies and equipment to early deploying forces."<sup>71</sup> The military utility of the island justifies further US investment to increase the availability of precision-strike weapons, such as Tomahawk missiles; enhance surveillance of local sea lanes; and augment operational flexibility to host short- and long-range aircraft. At the same time, in an era in which such regional powers as Iran are developing increasingly effective long-range precision strike capabilities, remoteness increasingly has its advantages.

Once access points are established, the plan to use them must not fall through administrative cracks. From the perspective of the US Unified Command (USUCOM) plan, which establishes the missions and geographic responsibilities among the combatant commanders, Diego Garcia links three nearby combatant commands, Central Command (CENTCOM), Pacific Command (PACOM), and the new Africa Command (AFRICOM), each of which plays a role in countering transnational threats to regional security that span administrative boundaries. Although “owned” administratively by PACOM, the island lies only a few hundred miles southeast of the north-south seam of the CENTCOM and PACOM, which bisects the Indian Ocean vertically – as depicted in Figure 3 – and then cuts due west along the equator toward Kenya and AFRICOM. J. Stephen Morrison, director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies’ Africa Program, has testified to the challenges presented by seams in the Unified Command Plan, noting that achieving unity of effort in the face of

FIGURE 3  
UNIFIED COMMAND PLAN IN THE INDIAN OCEAN.



- ★ National Capitals
  - Cities 3,000,000+
  - Cities 900,000-2,999,999
  - Cities 250,000-899,999
  - Cities 75,000-249,999
  - Cities 0-74,999
- International Boundaries
  - Highways
  - Primary Roads
  - Major Rivers
  - Lakes
- 0 345 690 Miles  
0 345 690 KM

these bureaucratic divisions “requires stronger leadership, coherence and integration of programs, and more effective management.”<sup>72</sup> This is quite worrying in the context of the Indian Ocean littoral where few of the transnational threats and challenges neatly conform to these bureaucratic boundaries.

Finally, no base is ideally located or suited to every mission – and so it is often important to find work-arounds. Diego Garcia contains a mere 5 percent of the land mass of Guam, an island similarly situated and used by the US military in the Western Pacific. Consequently, the atoll is not scalable to the same degree as Guam, which provides for the home porting of three submarines in its expansive Apra Harbor. However, creative use of space at Diego Garcia’s pier, coupled with utilities upgrades, will maximize SSGN employment in the Indian Ocean and raise the island’s military profile from a simple logistical hub to a well-equipped naval facility.

### *Diego Garcia and US Indian Ocean Strategy*

A number of planning principles follow from our analysis of Diego Garcia and the surrounding region. First, host nation support for basing and facilities access is critical, and seeking ways to solidify a positive and mutually beneficial relationship are obviously imperative. In locations that lack Diego Garcia’s political advantages, this includes addressing the objections of the population affected by US presence. Securing the support of the host nation population, as well as its leaders, requires a conscientious effort to not only be good stewards of the area of operations but also to ensure that interactions off base are appropriate. Second, strategists must account for environmental factors and monitor trends that may imperil access points. Third, every base should be folded into a larger administrative plan and used to its maximum extent, either for current operations or contingencies. In this way, it is necessary to properly identify the strategic logistical and operational needs that are extant or might emerge, especially given a possible rise in tensions from any number of sources. Fourth, creating efficiencies in the use of space within a base and finding the same within the larger force structure are an important part of maximizing operational capabilities. It is also critical to consider the full logistical exertion that is necessary to execute expeditionary operations and to determine whether bases are sufficiently close, either to each other or to an area of particular concern.

The US approach to the region, as governed by these principles, must be calibrated to achieve maximum influence with minimum interference. The overarching objective is to ensure a stable region in which trade flows freely. This hinges, in turn, on the efforts to defeat extremists, counter proliferation, and deter aggression – and those operations must occur within the context of strategic security partnerships. To build those partnerships, the United States seeks to communicate the enduring nature of its commitment to the region and to do so in a way that is based on shared interests. US CENTCOM, for example, is seeking to leverage bilateral relationships with partners in the region to achieve multilateral effects. This process, referred to by General David Petraeus, Commander of the US CENTCOM, as “multi-bilateralism,” works as a dynamic network, with partners interacting with each other *through* the United States in a number of functional areas of their choice. To do this, it is necessary to build partner capacity to



pursue common interests, which is fundamental to the US approach to the CENTCOM region and can be seen in Bahrain, Qatar, and Oman.

US deployments from Diego Garcia will not take place in a vacuum but rather in an Indian Ocean increasingly influenced by other key actors – most notably India and China. Reviewing the strategic perspectives of both of these rapidly rising naval powers is essential to understand the strategic context within which US forces will operate.

### Emerging Powers

A growing share of global economic output and key aspects of international peace and security are bound to the Indian Ocean littoral, and the United States, India, and China are among those with overlapping interests in this vital region. Whether the United States can protect its interests in the Indian Ocean depends, in turn, on its own strategy as well as the regional interests and strategies of India and China.

#### *India and the Indian Ocean*

India's landmass protrudes into the ocean at its east-west midpoint. This places India adjacent to the primary maritime trade routes that link the Strait of Hormuz, Arabian Sea, and Horn of Africa on the one hand and with the Bay of Bengal and Strait of Malacca on the other. With nearly 3,500 miles of continental and 1,300 miles of island coastline, a substantial portion of the country physically touches the Indian Ocean. This provides India with a massive Exclusive Economic Zone in the Indian Ocean of 2.54 million square miles – nearly 10 percent of the ocean's total area.<sup>73</sup>

As US maritime analysts note, "Driving India's naval strategy is the concept that the vast Indian Ocean is *mare nostrum* . . . that the entire triangle of the Indian Ocean is their nation's rightful and exclusive sphere of interest."<sup>74</sup> Indeed, India considers its "extended neighborhood" to reach "across [Asia's] sub-regions – be it East Asia, West Asia, Central Asia, South Asia, or Southeast Asia."<sup>75</sup> Numerous Indian sources, ranging from Defense Minister George Fernandes to the Indian Navy's 2004 Maritime Doctrine, have defined "the arc from the Persian Gulf to the Straits of Malacca as a legitimate area of interest . . . For the first quarter of the 21st century," while the 2009 iteration of the doctrine defines the Red Sea, South China Sea, and southern Indian Ocean as "secondary areas" of maritime interest.<sup>76</sup>

India's interests in this region are largely economic in nature, with energy access and growing regional economic engagement prompting concerns about the safety of shipping transiting the entire Indian Ocean littoral. In recent years, official statements have underscored increasingly the importance India attaches to energy security, which "is vital for an assured high rate of [economic] growth."<sup>77</sup> India's oil consumption is expected to double by 2025, which would make it the world's third largest energy consumer, after the United States and China.<sup>78</sup> At present, India imports more than half of its natural gas and 70 percent of its oil, the supermajority of which comes from the Persian Gulf. With roughly 90 percent of its external trade by volume and 77 percent by value traveling by sea, it is not surprising that the security of shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean are a major concern for India. Indeed, a host of observers have argued that India's economy is "at the mercy of the power which controls the sea."<sup>79</sup>

India's extended neighborhood offers it significant opportunities for beneficial economic engagement. In addition to being a source of energy, India considers the Persian Gulf region to be, in the words of Prime Minister Manmohan Singh, "part of our natural economic hinterland."<sup>80</sup> The importance of the Persian Gulf/North Africa to India's economy generally can be seen in the fact that the UAE is India's third largest trading partner, while the region as a whole accounts for more than 20 percent of India's exports and nearly 30 percent of its imports.<sup>81</sup> At the opposite end of its extended neighborhood, India's focus is driven by economic engagement with Southeast Asia. During 2007–08, India-Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) trade reached \$40 billion.<sup>82</sup> As of early 2009, the ASEAN countries as a whole accounted for 11 percent of India's exports and 9 percent of its imports.<sup>83</sup>

While some Western scholars have argued that New Delhi desires primacy or hegemony in the Indian Ocean, Indian analysts suggest that it instead seeks, more modestly, to develop the capability to "balance the influence of other powers and prevent them from undercutting" India's interests in this zone.<sup>84</sup> The latter goal is significantly more achievable in the near term, because while India's navy ranks as the world's fifth largest, it is currently contracting as obsolete ships leave service faster than they are being replaced, albeit by more capable modern platforms. The present fleet is built around the aging aircraft carrier *INS Viraat*, which is supplemented by just fewer than 60 surface combatants – many of which are at the end of their service life – and more than a dozen diesel-electric submarines. The Navy's ambitious goal is to have a "160-plus ship navy, including three aircraft carriers, 60 major combatants, including submarines, and close to 400 aircraft of different types" by 2022.<sup>85</sup> However, even this fleet would possess only a modest ability to project Indian power to the furthest reaches of the Indian Ocean or influence military operations on land. At present, India's naval capabilities allow it to defend its territorial waters and undertake a policing role in the sea lanes of the northern Indian Ocean; it would require significantly more capability to achieve primacy in the littoral region or have the capacity to forcibly deter the unwanted interventions of extraregional actors.

The issue of extraregional actors in the Indian Ocean is particularly acute for New Delhi because, as the 2004 Indian Maritime Doctrine predicts, all "major powers of this century will seek a toehold in the [Indian Ocean Region.]"<sup>86</sup> India has long sought to preclude other powers from gaining a lasting presence in the Indian Ocean,<sup>87</sup> a goal that assumes added urgency in light of the popular belief that India lost its independence when it lost control of the Indian Ocean in the sixteenth century.<sup>88</sup> Since the end of the Cold War, China has replaced the United States as the extraregional actor of primary concern. China's long-standing support for Pakistan and its perceived effort to establish a network of ports and partnerships with countries in the littoral region – including several nations that have traditionally been hostile to India – are viewed by some as part of a coherent strategy to encircle India and confine its influence to South Asia.<sup>89</sup> These concerns are accompanied by apprehension over the People's Liberation Army Navy's ongoing expansion, which is viewed as a possible threat to India's strategic interests in the region.<sup>90</sup>

In contrast, there appears to be much less concern about US presence in the Indian Ocean. While Indian politicians once denounced Diego Garcia as an "imperialistic" and

“neo-colonial” outpost, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991 and the subsequent reorientation of India’s economic and foreign policies enabled significant improvements in Indo-American relations. Recognition of common interests and concerns in areas ranging from securing the free flow of commerce to halting the spread of radical Islam have led to enhanced economic and security ties between the two nations.<sup>91</sup>

Indian attitudes toward US naval power in the Indian Ocean have adjusted accordingly. Indian strategists recognize that the United States will remain the world’s preeminent economic and military power for the next several decades. As such, US power will likely be committed to defending the status quo in the international system, which will continue to provide the stability India requires to sustain its own economic development. In the context of the Indian Ocean, US military presence is now seen a stabilizing factor in an otherwise fragile region. The absence of criticism of Diego Garcia and US military presence in the region has been notable at a time when military operations in support of the Global War on Terror have increased substantially the US forces in Central Asia and the Horn of Africa region as well as the use of Diego Garcia’s air and naval facilities.

Although India ultimately seeks strategic autonomy in its foreign affairs, in light of these latter developments, New Delhi has looked favorably on its strategic ties with Washington as a means to reinforce its position in the Indian Ocean. Given US ability to base substantial air assets at Diego Garcia and to deploy naval forces from the Gulf and the Pacific to the Indian Ocean, there is recognition that US presence in the littoral can complement India’s quest for a peaceful and stable regional order.

#### *China and the Indian Ocean*

Since the Cold War’s end, Chinese analysts have seen US forces in Diego Garcia as part of a larger strategy to maintain US control of East Asia at China’s expense, in the form of an “unsinkable aircraft carrier in the Indian Ocean.”<sup>92</sup> Current Chinese analyses of Diego Garcia’s significance for Beijing’s interests are not nearly as alarmist as those concerning US bases in Japan and Guam, which are perceived as key links in the “First” and “Second Island Chain[s],” respectively – fortified barriers that China must continue to penetrate to project maritime power.<sup>93</sup> These are considered more directly relevant to military scenarios involving China’s contested territorial claims, but if China comes to see Diego Garcia as part of an extended First Island Chain, as several People’s Liberation Army–published articles suggest, and seeks to deploy significant forces to the India Ocean, China might then regard the island as a long-term obstacle to military power projection.<sup>94</sup>

China’s current naval platforms and weaponry still suggest an “access denial” strategy focused on deterring Taiwan from declaring independence. Beyond Taiwan, the PLAN may not seek to project substantial naval influence into the Western Pacific; rather, it may focus south and west along the strategic sea lanes through Southeast Asia and along the subcontinent. Persistent fears of oil supply interdiction, together with China’s growing interests in maritime resource and commerce, may gradually drive more long-ranging naval development westward.<sup>95</sup> However, it should be noted that: (a) capabilities will not match Chinese intentions any time soon; (b) Chinese naval ambitions in the Indian Ocean region will run afoul of those of India, another rising

great power operating far closer to home; and (c) whatever its leanings in the abstract, Beijing must tend to matters in East Asia before it can apply its energies to building up naval forces able to vie for supremacy in the Indian Ocean region.<sup>96</sup>

Meanwhile, in an effort to secure its own interests in the Indian Ocean littoral, China has established a complex “soft power” web of diplomacy, trade, humanitarian assistance, arms sales, port construction, and even strategic partnerships with countries in the region. The goal of this strategy is to maximize access to resource inputs and trade in peacetime, while raising the political costs of any severing of seaborne energy supplies in times of crisis by hostile naval powers. As mentioned earlier, analysts and bureaucrats at the highest levels in New Delhi view these moves with suspicion, and many fear that China seeks to encircle India. Indeed, there are modest but growing suggestions that Beijing’s Indian Ocean ambitions may grow with its national power. While China’s current military movement toward the Indian Ocean should not be exaggerated, over the longer term, a significant presence could challenge the region’s status quo.

### **Influence and Cooperation in the Indian Ocean**

The security situation in the Indian Ocean region, long characterized by uncertain relations between its major power brokers, is prone to strategic miscalculation. More than ever before, the interests of the United States, India, and China all coincide and collide in the Indian Ocean littoral. These key states, one predominant and the others ascendant, may find themselves at odds as they protect national interests in a region with great potential and numerous challenges, including:

- volatile and fragile states, which are often beset by, and sometimes facilitate, irregular threats, irredentist powers, sectarian divides, and religious tensions;
- a rich flow of resources through constrained and vulnerable shipping lanes;
- often skittish host nations; and
- newly capable actors possibly seeking to undermine others’ influence by sustained projection of power.

The future stability of the Indian Ocean security environment depends on the extent to which the interests of the region’s major stakeholders can coexist. Accordingly, the approach of each state to the region is of particular interest. For China, India, and the United States, an age-old strategic calculus prevails in the long-standing interplay between state power, influence, and presence throughout the Indian Ocean littoral: To protect interests, it helps to have influence. To exercise influence, it helps to have presence. To establish presence, it helps to have power. And, completing the cycle, state interests tend to expand as power does, further complicating the interactions of emerging powers.

It has been widely argued that the world is undergoing a significant geopolitical realignment as the global “center of gravity” shifts from the Euro-Atlantic to the greater Asia-Pacific.<sup>97</sup> The National Intelligence Council envisions “fast developing powers, notably India and China,” joining the United States “atop a multipolar international system.”<sup>98</sup> As India and China continue to accrete military might, they pull this zero point – where no forces dominate – toward the Indian Ocean. In such a dynamic

international environment, the United States will have to adapt its geostrategic focus if it hopes to retain its position of global preeminence in the twenty-first century.

This is particularly true in the maritime dimension, where the US Navy guarantees the free flow of goods at sea worldwide. To maintain its preponderant position, the United States will have to shift its geostrategic focus from the Euro-Atlantic, which, after decades of American attention, is prosperous, secure, and self-sustaining, to regions of the world that were once dismissed as peripheral to American interests. One such area is the Indian Ocean, the littoral of which is emerging as a key strategic region in the “Asian Century.”

Most importantly, America’s forward bases facilitate the projection of US power around the globe, and in the post-Cold War strategic environment, access to such facilities has become more tenuous. Yet, maintaining the security of the sea lanes and the free flow of goods transiting the Indian Ocean requires a sustained US maritime presence. This presence depends on access, which is particularly constrained by domestic politics across the Indian Ocean littoral. In such an environment, American interests are best served by the cultivation of a regional presence for strike and deterrence that does not depend on the acquiescence of local governments responding to sometimes volatile public sentiment.

Sustained US preeminence in the greater Indian Ocean region will be increasingly difficult to realize without an appreciation for the need to invest in a flexible and enduring basing structure. At the center, Diego Garcia offers politically unconstrained access. Elsewhere in the region, the United States should attempt to reduce political risks “by basing in small, politically stable nations at the periphery of troubled areas that have strong geopolitical reasons to ally with America, and under any circumstances away from major cities.”<sup>99</sup> Qatar, with its rich gas reserves abutting those of Iran, its majority population of non-Qatari citizens, and its ongoing border dispute with Saudi Arabia, is thus well placed to host CENTCOM’s Middle East Operations Center at al-Udeid Air Base. Larger bases should be supplemented with multiple, redundant, forward-operating locations, as the United States enjoys in Bahrain and Singapore. The latter offers a compelling model: access based on a special agreement, with regular port calls; a small headquarters for Commander, Logistics Western Pacific; and a skeletal personnel footprint. To maximize its chances of maintaining favorable access in host nations, the United States should prepare for all political contingencies by maintaining close relations with a wide variety of current and potential political actors; seek the formal ratification of agreements in host nation legislatures where possible; and pay, as necessary, for access transparently (to receive public credit) if reasonable terms can be arranged.<sup>100</sup>

With such a flexible constellation of bases and other facilities in place, US strategists must shield these bases and the larger region from any interference by state and sub-state actors, both physically and politically. In doing so, the United States must avoid an insular approach and craft a coherent Indian Ocean policy that accounts for the reactions of India and China as well as the interests of its regional partners. That approach will strengthen US command of the commons in partnership with India and may open ways to engage with China in the Indian Ocean. The Department of Defense would do well to reprise the approach taken by the Office of International Security Affairs

in the late 1990s, which issued a series of unclassified regional policy documents.<sup>101</sup> A direct evaluation of Indian Ocean policy, which could assist in taking a holistic view of the Indian Ocean littoral and the unique aspects of Indian Ocean security rather than narrowly viewing separate PACOM, CENTCOM and AFRICOM theaters, is long overdue.

The challenge of securing the transit of major trade and energy supplies through areas threatened by an irredentist state sponsor of terrorism seeking to develop nuclear weapons, weak and failing states, extreme poverty, religious extremism, and transnational terrorism requires reliable, rapid operational access to strategic sea lanes and selected land-based threats without inflaming anti-Americanism. A comprehensive regional strategy would encourage more rapid and extensive infrastructure development *in concert with partners* in the region. The United States must augment its regional knowledge, enhance coordination, and for the first time, consider the Indian Ocean holistically as a vital strategic space with a networked basing arrangement at its core.

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