The US Element: Diego Garcia as a Strategic Dilemma for India

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Key Points

- India has historically objected to the presence of foreign navies in the Indian Ocean.
- Diego Garcia was established as a US base as the UK withdrew from its posts east of Suez in the 1970s.
- Around the same time, the Soviet Union took a greater interest in the Indian Ocean – and became a key supplier of India’s military assets.
- India has supported the decolonisation and return to Mauritius of the Chagos Archipelago, which includes Diego Garcia.
- In the current geopolitical circumstances, however, Diego Garcia poses a strategic dilemma for India.

Summary

India’s long-held resistance to the militarisation of the Indian Ocean, and its desire to see the implementation of the ocean as a Zone of Peace has not eventuated.

Across decades, the United States has operated a base on the island of Diego Garcia, which is part of Mauritius’s Chagos Archipelago. It was ceded to Britain post-Mauritian independence and further developed as a base for all Middle East operations after Britain withdrew from posts east of Suez. Named the British Indian Ocean Territory in 1966, it was made available for the defence purposes of both the UK and US governments. India, however, has consistently supported Mauritius in its claim for the return of the archipelago and its decolonisation, and will not change that stance. The Soviet Union’s (and later
Russia’s) presence in the Indian Ocean had contributed to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi’s statement in 1980 that the ocean was ‘churning with danger’. In the later Cold War years, however, the Soviet Union, and when that entity collapsed, its successor state, Russia, became and has remained the key supplier of military assets, including naval requirements, for India.

With its growing strategic engagement with Washington short of formal alliance, Indian policymakers must consider the disadvantages generated by its Indian Ocean presence, but also the effect of any future withdrawal of US forces and the likelihood of a vacuum for China to fill. Thus, there are obvious advantages for India in the US presence – but its commitment to decolonisation and support for Mauritius has created a conundrum.

Analysis

_The Indian Ocean: An Unrealised Zone of Peace_

Twelve Heads of Government from Indian Ocean and Pacific countries met at the first Commonwealth Heads of Government Regional Meeting (CHOGRM), held in Sydney in 1978. It was established by Australian Prime Minister Malcolm Fraser with the support first of Indian Prime Ministers, Morarji Desai, and Indira Gandhi, who was returned to power, at the 1980 CHOGRM held in New Delhi. Both meetings had a focus on the Indian Ocean.

The 1978 Communiqué noted the talks between the United States and the Soviet Union on ‘mutual limitations of their military presence in the Indian Ocean’ and assurances given by both that they would report on the progress of their talks.¹ Both expressed the hope that practical steps would be taken to speed up the implementation of a declaration of the Indian Ocean as a Zone of Peace and urged other ‘major maritime users’ to co-operate with Indian Ocean rim countries.

The Zone of Peace did not eventuate and, at the 1980 CHOGRM in New Delhi, Indira Gandhi saw the Ocean as ‘churning with danger’ due to the increasing pace of ‘militarisation’, the Soviet occupation of Afghanistan from 1979, and the renewal of the Cold War with threats to regional stability.²

_The Cold War Players_

Long established, the island of Diego Garcia became a vital US base and a significant reason for India’s categorisation of the Indian Ocean as militarised. Across decades, all US Middle East operations have used the island as its base since the British Government withdrew from its posts east of Suez from 1970. Prior to that, in the early 1960s, Washington had started

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² NAA: M1268, 25 Part 1, Fraser’s Personal Papers including CHOGRM Provisional Record of the Opening Session, 4 September 1980, pp. 4-5. See also A. Weigold, “Australia-India Relations in Insecure Times: Malcolm Fraser’s Engagement” (2013), A. Weigold & L. Brennan (Eds), Re-thinking India: Perceptions from Australia, New Delhi, Readworthy, p. 22.
talks with London about the establishment of a shared defence facility on Diego Garcia. The island chain of which it was a part, the Chagos Archipelago, surrendered by the Government of Mauritius on payment of compensation, together with three islands formerly part of the Seychelles, formed a new colony, albeit post-regional independence. Called the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), in 1966 the area was made available for the defence purposes of both governments as they may arise.

The British excised part of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius prior to its independence in 1966 and, between 1968 and 1973, removed the local population from the island. The Chagossians were deported to Mauritius and Seychelles to make way for the military base, and the movement for their repatriation remains a critical issue in Indo-US relations.

Also seen by Indira Gandhi as part of its militarisation, and despite its distance from the Indian Ocean, the Soviet Union maintained a naval presence there. Russia in the end did not have a port in the Indian Ocean but used the Berbera Port in Somalia in the 1970s while the US was establishing its base on Diego Garcia.

Strategically, the Indian Ocean was the only sea link between the Soviet Union’s eastern port, Vladivostok, and maritime access to Afghanistan, a route to its western provinces. India, however, while decrying the presence of “foreign” navies in what it saw as its ocean, sought to assemble a stronger navy with Soviet support. Into the mid-1960s, India had remained dependent on Britain for its naval supplies. They were denied when India failed to meet US and UK demands to contribute to collective defence against the perceived communist threat. It turned to Russia, already a long-term friend, and still a key supplier of Indian weaponry.
The arrival of the *USS Enterprise*, supporting Pakistan, followed by a Soviet fleet, into the Bay of Bengal during the last days of the war that saw the emergence of Bangladesh in 1971 was the start of India’s then political position calling for all foreign navies to leave the Indian Ocean, the call dramatically repeated by Indira Gandhi at the 1980 CHOGRM.

**Diego Garcia – A Thorn in Indo-US Relations**

With its historical background opposing “foreign” naval presences in the Indian Ocean and its ongoing opposition to colonialism, but now faced with China’s pervading naval incursions, India today faces a dilemma over its position on the US base on Diego Garcia.

Securing a non-binding motion enabling decolonisation by Mauritius, which was passed overwhelmingly by the UN General Assembly in May 2019, does not resolve India’s dilemma. India voted in favour of Mauritius, ignoring United States and British expectations for its support in their favour. India’s Permanent Representative to the UN, Ambassador Syed Akbaruddin, stated that as part of his country’s support for all peoples seeking decolonisation, ‘India has consistently supported Mauritius in its quest for the restoration of sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago’. He went on to say that, in supporting the resolution on behalf of members of the Group of African States, among which Mauritius is a developing state, ‘India has age-old people-to-people bonds’.

His statement unequivocally demonstrates India’s support for Mauritius and its indigenous peoples’ rights, which, in terms of policy, it cannot set aside in order to maintain a US presence. Nonetheless, policymakers must consider the effect of a withdrawal of US forces, given India’s growing military and strategic ties with America, and the likelihood of an ensuing strategic vacuum that would be filled by China.

In considering an Indian Ocean without the Diego Garcia base, notional advantages for India without an ongoing US presence appear. It does not support US naval moves in the Persian Gulf that seek to coerce Iran, nor has it operationalised their mutual logistics agreement, which could open its island bases in the Andaman Sea. The latter, however, raises a caveat: a US naval presence there might limit China’s incursions into the Indian Ocean. Another potentially negative outcome for India may be its bilateral engagements with the US, a tri-service exercise and joint anti-submarine patrols that push India towards a closer relationship with the US. Becoming effectively an alliance partner remains unacceptable to an autonomy-seeking India.

Further jeopardising India’s relations with long-term partner, Iran, in collaborative port and transport ventures already disrupted by sanctions and a reluctance to invest on the part of Indian businesses, is not a strategic advantage for India, either.

The Observer Research Foundation argues that aligning with ‘a powerful actor like the US’ has been beneficial across the board, establishing ties with its allies, including Australia and Japan (potential Quad partners), and Singapore and Saudi Arabia. If, however, India’s primary interest remains a “peaceful and stable Indian Ocean” enabling its economic goals, can that be achieved without the US presence at its Diego Garcia base?
That is an ongoing conundrum for a committed post-colonial India, which also has ongoing security needs.

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About the Author: Dr Auriol Weigold is an Adjunct Associate Professor in the Faculty of Business, Government and Law at the University of Canberra. She has been a Fellow and Honorary Fellow at the Australian Prime Ministers Centre at Old Parliament House, Canberra, between 2010 and 2015, publishing on Australian and Indian prime ministerial relationships. In 2016, she spent a period as a Guest Scholar at the Indian Institute of Advanced Studies at Shimla. Previously, she was Convenor of the BA International Studies at the University of Canberra, an Editor in the Faculty of Arts and Design and for the University of Canberra's Personal History Project, and has been an Editor of the South Asia Masala weblog, hosted by the College of Asia and the Pacific at the Australian National University. In 2008, she published her first book: Churchill, Roosevelt and India: Propaganda during World War II. Since then, she has co-edited and contributed to two further books. Her research interests include the Australia-India bilateral relationship, India’s energy and security needs, and Indo-British relations in the 1940s.

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