

The current strategic importance of the British Indian Ocean Territory and its likely importance into the future

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This submission focuses on ‘the current strategic importance of the British Indian Ocean Territory and its likely importance into the future’.

1. My background is an experienced observer of Indian Ocean affairs, stemming from my research and teaching at Brunel University and current membership and writing for the Centre for International Maritime Security (CIMSEC). My research has ranged over Indo-Pacific geopolitics, and has naturally included the UK at various points. This has included recent publications like ‘Small islands strategies in the Indo-Pacific by large powers’ (*Journal of Territorial and Maritime Studies*, 2021); ‘UK carrier capacity returns to the Indo-Pacific’ (CIMSEC, 2021); ‘Global Britain: reaching for the Indo-Pacific’ (Henry Jackson Society, 2019), ‘Britain returns to the Indian Ocean?’ (*Round Table. Commonwealth Journal for International Affairs*, 2018). I was an invited discussant on Indian Ocean security at the Foreign Office in July 2017, and submitted evidence on UK-India relations to the Commons Foreign Affairs Committee in October 2018, and on UK Trans-Pacific Partnership membership to the Department of Trade & Industry Public Consultation in October 2018.

2. Some distances for immediate context.

Diego Garcia to Maldives:	1,173 km
Diego Garcia to Seychelles:	1,898 km
Diego Garcia to Kerala India:	1,998 km
Diego Garcia to Sri Lanka:	1,998 km
Diego Garcia to Mauritius:	2,156 km

The long distance away of Mauritius is apparent.

3. Mauritius’ immediate strategic interest in the BIOT is primarily economic, a large Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to claim. It was only in 1982, when the Militant Socialist Movement (MSM), came into power, that Mauritius first put forward what many would argue is a weak claim to the Chagos archipelago. Why this post-1982 push?

Economic reasons, following the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the whole concept of EEZs, which flow from sovereignty.

4. Mauritius' position as the largest Indian Ocean basin island, where the Indian Ocean Regional Association (IORA) is headquartered, give Mauritius a sense of self-importance and possible leadership. It has also made the smaller island states like the Seychelles wary of Mauritian pretensions.

5. Geographically the BIOT is far away from Mauritius. Internally, Mauritius (67% Indian-populated) has a poor record of treating the Chagossians (African-Malagasy stock), marginalized and neglected for several decades. Mauritius faces separatist trends on the more adjacent island of Rodrigues.

6. Mauritius does not particularly want to (or indeed could practically) use the large military facilities on Diego Garcia, which is why it has already announced it would be ready to let the UK/US operate there in the future. However, under what terms, and indeed security of tenure is unclear, uncomfortably so for UK and US strategic planners.

7. With regard to the UK strategic interest, Lord West, the former First Sea Lord and former Labour Party Minister is an acute maritime voice, recently describing Diego Garcia as a "strategic jewel, possession of which is crucial for security in the region and hence our national security".

8. Politically, British sovereignty over the BIOT is the main element in UK ability to present itself as a '*Resident Power*' in the Indian Ocean. From this has come membership of Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS), set up by India. In contrast China has tried to join the IONS, but its non-Resident Power status enables India to block it.

9. Potentially of course, the BIOT gives an associated EEZ of just over 544,450 km², more than double the size of the United Kingdom. This could open up fishing but also seabed mineral exploitation. However, the economic use of the BIOT's potential EEZ has not been pursued. Instead the UK has gone down the World Heritage route with announcement of a Fisheries Conservation and Management Zone in 1991, an Environment (Protection and Preservation) Zone in 2003, and a Marine Protected Area (MPA) in 2010. The MPA excluded Diego Garcia and its 3-mile territorial waters, around 470 km², in effect as a green enclave within a 200-mile Green zone.

10. From its very beginning, the BIOT has had strategic importance for the UK on account of its military role, and consequent value within the UK-US partnership. The military role is a question of location. Diego Garcia's location is simple, clear and evident – usable power projection and power connection. It is in the middle of the Indian Ocean, able to project around the Indian Ocean littorals of East Africa, the Middle East and South/Southeast Asia and Australia. This projection around the Indian enables cover of all the choke points (south of the Cape of Good Hope, the Bab-el-Mandeb, Straits of Hormuz and Malacca Straits) through which a huge quantity of global trade passes.

11. From 1966-2016 Diego was the only significant UK possession left in the Indian Ocean, while after 2016, under the 'Return to East of Suez' posture, Diego Garcia links the newly set up UK military facilities at Mombassa and Duqm with the military facilities being beefed up at Singapore. Take Diego Garcia out of the UK strategic map and it has a couple of toeholds at opposite ends of the Indian Ocean littorals with nothing connecting them. Within the 'UK Tilt to the Indo-Pacific' and increased naval deployments, Diego Garcia has remerged for the UK in strategic importance, HMS *Tamar* for example visiting in 2023.

12. The main significance of Diego Garcia is not so much though in UK use, but as an important feature in UK-US partnership. This was precisely the emphasis of Boris Johnson's typically flamboyant but accurate enough piece "Why would we be so utterly spineless as to give away the military base that plays such a key role in our alliance with America? (*Daily Mail*, September 22, 2023). This was alongside his argument that Mauritius had a weak claim on sovereignty (accurate, but not the subject of this submission) and that China would benefit from any such sovereignty transfer from the UK to Mauritius (accurate enough, to be discussed later on).

13. With regard to US strategic interest, Secretary of State Blinken reaffirmed Diego's strategic importance on December 7, 2023 in talks with UK Foreign Secretary David Cameron. He considered Diego Garcia:

A joint U.S.-UK military facility that plays a vital role in the Indo-Pacific region. For us, it plays a vital role in global security. It enables our own support for regional stability, it gives us an ability to respond rapidly to crises, and also to counter some of the most challenging threats that we face (Blinken, Joint Press Availability).

It was telling that in China, this statement was immediately denounced ('Moves of UK and US over Chagos expose true nature of 'values-based alliance', *Global Times*, Editorial, December 9, 2023).

14. The US side of the joint base is Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia, which falls within the operational jurisdiction of the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM). Its long runway provides berths for B-52 bombers, while its large deep lagoon can handle US aircraft carriers and submarines. Its Communications Facility is advanced; with the new 10,000km communication pipeline, the Oman Australia Cable, currently being laid between Perth and Salalah, going via Diego Garcia.

15. Diego Garcia's strategic significance for the US is two-fold. Firstly, it extends US power from the Pacific into the Indian Ocean, running from Hawaii through Guam to Diego Garcia. Admiral Samuel Pappano, commander of the Pacific Fleet visited Diego in December 2022. Secondly, Diego's Garcia's position centrally within the Indian Ocean enables projection of power in various quadrants, most enduringly across the North-Western Indian Ocean and over the Middle East. This enables further cooperation between INDOPACOM and CENTCOM and AFRICOM.

16. It is 3,760 km from Diego Garcia to Aden; with operations mounted in previous decades to campaigns in Afghanistan, Kuwait, Iraq and currently the Red Sea. Diego Garcia is a 'secure' base for the US and away from immediate interference. As China pushes across the Indian Ocean, Diego's Garcia's strategic significance for monitoring and interdicting only grows. In the other direction, it is 3,613 km from Diego Garcia to Singapore. Consequently in recent years regular long range missions to the South China Sea have also been carried out by B-52 Stratofortress and B-2 stealth bombers. Nuclear-powered ballistic missile attack submarines have been home ported at Diego Garcia, USS West Virginia in December 2022.

17. Diego Garcia has also been used by Australia for military operations for some years, including use of F/A-18 Hornets and C130 Hercules Transport Aircraft. As such, Diego Garcia could become further oil in the greasing of AUKUS cooperation in the Indian Ocean. Australia of course voted against Mauritius and for the UK in the UN General Assembly vote in May 2019.

18. The BIOT's immediate Indian Ocean neighbours present less evident support for Mauritius. This was on show in that UN General Assembly vote in May 2019. France, whose possession of Reunion is a French Department, abstained. The Seychelles, voted with the African Union bloc, but reluctantly. Distrust of Mauritian motives is evident in the Seychelles, carved out from British administration at Mauritius as a separate holding in 1903 (with obvious analogies to the carving out of the BIOT in 1965). The Maldives voted against Mauritius, and alongside the UK, the US and Australia.

19. For some time the Maldives has supported UK retention of sovereignty over the BIOT. This underpinned their agreement on fishing boundaries made in 1992 and was on show in the General Assembly vote in 2021 when the Maldives voted against Mauritius and in favour of the UK and US. Mauritius' attempts to establish a EEZ (which stems from sovereignty) over the Chagos waters was disputed at the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) by the Maldives.

20. However, in April 2023, ITLOS rejected the Maldives' arguments on competency, and split the intervening waters in April 2023 between the Maldives and Mauritius – 47,232 km² to the Maldives and 45,331km² to Mauritius. In effect, this now sets up a conflict between ITLOS recognition of 45,331km² which Mauritius can go ahead and exploit for its EEZ, even while the UK claims these waters as a Marine Protected Area (MPA), and now faces a strategic dilemma in enforcing or not such an MPA.

21. The Maldives has rowed back on its previous support for the UK. In August 2022 President Solih sent a letter to the Mauritian Prime Minister that the Maldives would back Mauritius' claim during future votes at the UN General Assembly. That may have been window dressing, but the pro-China position of the new Maldivian leader, President Muizzi elected in November 2023, may make the Maldives averse to expressing future support for the UK position.

22. There is an Indian factor in this area. The economics-driven rise of India is making the Indian Ocean of growing importance with its associated greater trade flows, and concerns over Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs).

23. However, there is also an India complication in which growing UK-India security cooperation is hampered by India supporting Mauritius' case over the Chagos archipelago, and thereby not using Diego Garcia as a spot for cooperation with the US and UK. This does not stop their otherwise burgeoning cooperation, driven by China-considerations; but it means that the scope of India's Logistics Exchange Agreement, reciprocal access to bases, already negotiated with the US in 2016 and currently being negotiated with the UK, does not involve Diego Garcia. India seems though happy enough with a continuing UK/US base at Diego Garcia. Indian concern over Mauritius drifting into dependency on China is an evident shared strategic interest with the UK and the UK.

23. China considerations increasingly surround discussion on Diego Garcia. Firstly, China has picked up on Diego Garcia as a stick to beat the UK with. Their state media interviewed Olivier Bancoult, born at Diego Garcia and leader of the Chagos Refugees Group, in November 2023, complete with headline 'US, UK forcing Chagossians out of homeland a crime against humanity' (*Global Times*, November 14, 2023). Secondly, China also used UK disregard of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) 'advisory' ruling on the Chagos ruling to call the UK hypocritical in demanding that China accept the 2016 Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA) ruling against it in the South China Sea.

24. Diego Garcia's own security is increasingly affected by China's growing presence in across the Indian Ocean. Hambantota (Sri Lanka), Gwadar (Pakistan) present privileged access for China, with Djibouti opened as a formal military base in 2019. Kyaukphyu (Myanmar) project was resumed in December 2023. What Hambantota, Gwadar and Kyaukphyu have in common is that not only were they built by China, but they are now being administered by Chinese state companies; Kyauphyu, earmarked for China International Trust investment Corporation, Hambantota by China Merchants Port Holding (99-year lease running from 2017) and Gwadar by the China Overseas Ports Holding Company (40 year lease running from 2013). Similar debt-equity swap dynamics in Mauritius could endanger the Western position at Diego Garcia.

25. The BIOT's closest neighbour is the Maldives, immediately to the north. There, the arrival of a pro-China administration in November 2023, saw President Muizzi's trip to Beijing in January 2024. Their relationship was elevated to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership, with the Maldives signing up for Beijing's Belt and Road initiative. This of course is the initiative, increasingly criticized across the West, the UK and US boycotting China's Belt and Road Forum held in June 2023, as had India and indeed the Maldives.

26. China's interest is of course the reverse. With its surrounding access to facilities and bases ever more noticeable in the Indian Ocean, Diego Garcia is a major encumbrance. Anything that weakens UK-US control over Diego Garcia strengthens China's position.

27. US concerns are also evident over China gaining access to the Chagos archipelago and Diego Garcia in particular, if UK control gave way to Mauritius. Although Mauritius has said that it would be happy for such US facilities to be maintained under Mauritius sovereignty, the US is not convinced, given Chinese courtship of Mauritius.

Washington's unease over the 2023 discussions between the UK and Mauritius was probably raised with London, given that for the US a 'secure' installation would have been rendered 'insecure'.

28. However, from a strategic point of view, this raises the issue of how much influence China might have over Mauritius in the future, and how might impact the operation of Diego Garcia if Mauritius had gained sovereignty over the territory.

29. The nightmare scenario would of course be that China somehow takes over the Diego Garcia facilities, operating as tenants of the sovereign power Mauritius, much in the way that the US operates as a tenant of the UK sovereign power. As a sovereign power Mauritius could maybe of course close down the Diego Garcia base. Is this likely? A precedent has recently been set, albeit on a smaller scale, by the change of government in the neighbouring Maldives, whose new pro-china President, Mohamad Muizzi, indeed has given Indian troops, admittedly relatively small in number, a March 2024 deadline to leave its helicopter base. More generally, growing Chinese influence in Mauritius could complete an uncomfortable encirclement of Diego Garcia running around Mauritius-Maldives-Sri Lanka. Mauritius is currently saying that it would be happy to continue US (and UK) basing rights in Diego Garcia if gaining sovereignty, but that in itself is no guarantee of future.

30. There is some cause for concern. Traditionally Mauritius has been closer to India, but under the Militant Socialist Movement administration of Pravind Jugnauth – in power from 2017 – Mauritius has moved away from Modi's more muscular Hindu nationalism. Instead, ties with China have warmed up. The Free Trade Agreement (FTA) between Mauritius and China which was signed in October 2020 and entered into force in January 2021 was the first one gained by China in Africa. The Mauritius-China Free Trade Agreement Cooperation Forum, which met in August 2023 continues to trumpet the importance of their cooperation. China's strategic interest in the FTA was regionally strategic. Firstly it links the China-Asia network to Africa, a trade FTA network that echoes the Silk Road Maritime element of the Belt and Road (BRI) initiative.

31. Proclaimed in 2013, the Maritime Silk Road has spread across the Indian Ocean islands, for example Sri Lanka in 2017 and the Seychelles in 2018. Mauritius is in eyes. This was already on show with the '21st century Maritime Silk Road Indian Oceans Island Conference' held in Mauritius in December 2016 and hosted by Mauritian entrepreneur Maxime King, the Mauritius Jin Fei Economic Trade and Cooperation Zone, and by the Bank of China. Although Mauritius has avoided entanglement with the BRI scheme, possibly due to domestic opinion and Indian sensitivities rather than Western sensitivities, that could well change in the future?

32. The strategic importance of the BIOT will in all likelihood strengthen. Its locational advantages are all the more cogent given the increasing threats to shipping routes around the north-west Indian Ocean from piracy, Islamist groups like the Houthis in Yemen, and state-level disruption by Iran. Diego Garcia continues to provide a secure off-shore projection point counterpoised against this increasing instability in the Middle East. China's naval expansion is bringing greater extension of naval power for the future. Guam stands as the strategic bulwark against China in the Western Pacific, but in the Indian Ocean Diego Garcia takes that role, able to bear down across China's Sea Lines of Communication and indeed able to cover over to the South China Sea, an increasingly fraught area.

33. Climate security is affecting the Chagos archipelago. Climate change, the greenhouse effect, is raising sea-levels and warming the sea, the latter effect destroying coral reefs which in turn accelerate coastal erosion and breaching of atolls (overtopping) by sea water. The 2014 *Feasibility Study for the Resettlement of the British Indian Ocean Territory* noted that among the Chagos atolls, Diego Garcia would be most hit by this trilogy of rising sea-levels, coastal erosion and overtopping. Such processes not only reduce the credibility of resettlement, but also potentially the ongoing viability of the military base.

Source: committees.parliament.uk/writtenevidence/128142/pdf/