

# Diego Garcia was never really ours. So sell it

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Britain still hasn't compensated the people it kicked off an island now inhabited by the US military — but it can

**Matthew Parris**



**B**arack, we need to talk about Diego Garcia. Maybe in the margins of Nato's grand 25th summit meeting, which starts tomorrow in Chicago, the British Prime Minister should have a word with the US President.

Barely audibly, a bomb is ticking beneath one of the Chagos archipelago of tiny islands, isolated reefs and atolls far away in the central Indian Ocean. No explosion is imminent, not yet, so there is no better time than now to defuse it. There's no rush, no pressure, no ill will, no frayed tempers and no nervous glance at the news agenda — in short, there's no politics in the issue — but, for all that, a small patch of British sovereign territory, the British Indian Ocean Territory island of Diego Garcia, is for us an unexploded bomb.

And now the briefing that should be offered to David Cameron. Bear with me because background matters.

Two Pentagon spears point towards the Asian continent from the Indian and Pacific oceans. Both spears are being sharpened.

In the Pacific the military population of America's 39,000-acre Guam base will be more than doubled by the year 2020, to 35,000. In the Indian Ocean, after many billions of dollars of investment, America's "Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia" (officially named "Camp Thunder Cove" and unofficially "Camp Justice") comprises two of the longest runways in the world, scores of anchorages, a deep water pier, a port, aircraft hangars, an air traffic terminal, storage for 1.3

million barrels of oil and facilities for more than 5,000 military personnel.

This is America's only significant military presence in the Indian Ocean, and, with its bases in Iraq and Afghanistan facing an uncertain future, the island is vastly important to the Pentagon. There was (in today's prices) a \$1.1 billion upgrade in 1980, another billion-dollar upgrade in 1986 and further upgrades to the submarine base and stealth-bomber hangars in 2007. It is estimated that there are up to 5,000 US military personnel and support staff on the island now. Though we British call the base a "joint" facility, there are only about 25 British personnel.

The base was pivotal during both Gulf wars, remains important for the Afghan war and guards sea lanes in the Indian Ocean. Were tensions with Iran to rise, its significance as a threatened base for operations needs no elaboration. Camp Thunder Cove is used for surveillance, for readiness and for bombing raids, and has been used (as the Foreign Secretary at the time,

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David Miliband, finally admitted in 2008) for extraordinary rendition.

A Commons Foreign Affairs Select Committee concluded that "it is deplorable that previous US assurances about rendition flights have turned out to be false. The failure of the US Administration to tell the truth resulted in the UK Government inadvertently misleading our Select Committee and the House of Commons."

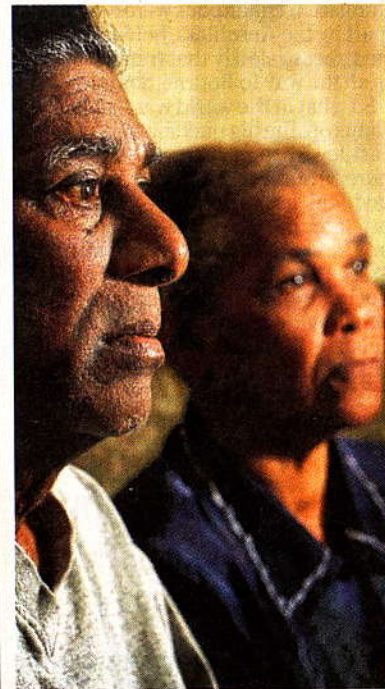
It is also possible (in the view of many, almost certain) that "high value" detainees are kept on Diego Garcia for "processing". In 2006 US General McCaffrey blurted out:

"They're behind bars... we've got them on Diego Garcia..." He later withdrew the claim, but few observers doubt that the base is available as a substantial prison. There are said to be facilities for up to 3,000 detainees. I imply no judgment as to whether such activities and the dissimulation surrounding them are justifiable or necessary. They may be. I simply report.

How did we get here? Britain acquired this archipelago as a package with (formerly French) Mauritius in 1814. The islands were used as a slaving post. Granting Mauritius independence in 1965, a Labour Government (under American urging) bought the archipelago from the Mauritians. On December 30, 1966 we leased the Chagos islands to the US at a rent of \$1 per annum for a minimum term of 50 years, America's condition being that we removed all the inhabitants. The lease was renewable by mutual consent, notification being required by December 30, 2014. In 2010 Britain threw a huge marine reserve around the whole archipelago, keeping people and vessels (but not US vessels) out. You may conclude that the motives were not exclusively ecological.

In 1966, having at first denied that there were any inhabitants, we deported the Chagossians to Mauritius, without appeal, for inadequate compensation, beginning a saga of court challenges that continues to this day and is now before the European Court. That whole story is utterly disgraceful. I've written about it here before and this not the moment to reprise the sorry tale. Only generous compensation will end it.

With the future of Western relations with Iran in increasing doubt, there has been a stirring of international interest this year in America's Indian Ocean presence. Its eye on Australia's Cocos Islands (south west of Sri Lanka), the Pentagon has been putting out feelers to Canberra. This caused a flurry of concern in Australia earlier this year. Neither Washington's



Islanders who were displaced in 1966 are still involved in a court challenge

ambitions nor Australian doubts are likely to go away.

This is the moment for Britain to get shot of the whole wretched business. Somebody has to patrol the Indian Ocean, but it isn't ever going to be us again. We have effectively lost our British Indian Ocean Territory to the Americans, who are in de facto control. If you doubt it, try to imagine Parliament demanding to send a mission to inspect the entirety of our "joint" base and the operations there. Washington would simply say no. Or imagine a British Government telling the Americans that we henceforward forbade the use of our territory for extraordinary rendition and planned to reinforce our 25 personnel there — and insisted that they must be given unrestricted access to all operations.

No: to put it bluntly, we've sold the pass. The Americans do not accept being talked to like this, and do not have to. We are powerless. Yet US military threats to Iran, involving the use of a British-owned base, would be tremendously difficult and damaging for this country.

But is it even conceivable in the circumstances of this century that the year after next we should tell the Americans that we would not be renewing their lease in 2016 and they had better start dismantling their base? After all the billions they've invested there, basing their whole military strategy in that part of the globe on their use of the base? The very idea is ridiculous. No British Government would do this. There would be a ghastly political scene; deeply embarrassing, not least, to our American ally.

And therein lies the way out. We should offer to cede sovereign power over the territory to the United States of America on expiry of the lease, asking \$3 billion as the price. With just a tiny fraction of this we could generously compensate both the Chagossians and their Mauritian hosts. Thereafter, the Americans could do what they liked on Diego Garcia, all world protests being politely redirected to Washington.

These islands, with their base, number among the most strategically important acres on the planet. To us they are no longer of use. Our writ has ceased for ever to run there, but somewhere in a drawer we still have the title deeds. Any good Tory, Mr Osborne, should see where the logic points.

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