



Natoizing Diego Garcia:

A proposal for ending 50 years of Anglo-American shame in the Indian Ocean

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Are you looking for a professional challenge, a close-knit team, unbelievable recreational facilities and exquisite natural beauty? Then a tour of duty with the US Navy on Diego Garcia—the "Best Kept Secret in the Navy"—is the place for you. The Navy's on-line "[Welcome Aboard](#)" pack describes it as the "perfect place" with outstanding living and working conditions and "constantly expanding facilities to make life more comfortable." The pack even includes a short history of Diego Garcia to help new recruits orient themselves.



(aerial view of Diego Garcia - photo credit: [Serendigity/flickr](#))

Unfortunately, however, this history lesson omits to mention the forcible removal by the British government of the original inhabitants of Diego Garcia and a small group of neighbouring islands (collectively known as the Chagos Islands) over 40 years ago. Nor that the British authorities aided and abetted by the US government, continue to prevent their return to this day. In October 2008, the Chagos islanders lost their 10-year legal battle in the British courts to return to the Indian Ocean archipelago. A 3-2 ruling by the law lords (the British equivalent of the US Supreme Court) overturned the islanders' earlier legal victories. The story of the exile of the Chagossians from their homeland is one of the most shameful episodes in Britain's 'special relationship' with the United States – but you

won't find any of this mentioned in any US naval tour guide or in the US mainstream press.

The Chagos archipelago is a small group of coral atolls in the Indian Ocean, lying south of the equator, about halfway between India and Africa. Discovered by the Portuguese in the 16th century, the islands remained uninhabited until French coconut planters brought in slave labour 200 years later. Surrendered to Britain after the Napoleonic wars, the archipelago was a dependency of Mauritius until 1965, when it was detached, later becoming the British Indian Ocean Territories (BIOT). It remains sovereign British territory, although sovereignty is also claimed by both Mauritius and the Seychelles. The UK does not recognise Mauritius' claim, but has [agreed to cede the territory](#) to Mauritius when it is no longer required for defence purposes.

The largest atoll is Diego Garcia, a 37-mile-long coral island. Between 1967 and 1971 the British government forcibly removed the estimated 2,000 inhabitants so that the island could be secretly leased to the US Navy for use as a Cold War air and naval base. The islanders were taken to the Seychelles and Mauritius, more than 1,000 miles away, with neither compensation nor help in resettling. Today, many remain in poverty, while their former home is currently occupied by around 2,500 US military and civilian personnel: the serene sounding, [US Navy Support Facility](#), which functions as the host for 16 separate command functions. A 50-strong group of British military personnel handle the administration: police, customs, courts, as well as work and entry permits. Services are provided to the US base under highly lucrative agreements with private military contractors, including that old Washington favourite, Halliburton.

The US military regards Diego Garcia as an indispensable platform for carrying out defence and security responsibilities in the Arabian Gulf, the Middle East, South Asia and East Africa. It has played a vital role in several key military interventions, including the 1991 Gulf War, and more recent campaigns in Iraq (2003) and Afghanistan (ongoing since 2001). US Air Force bombers and Awacs surveillance planes operate from a 12,000ft runway and the USAF Space Command has built a satellite tracking station and



(photo credit: [booleadozer](#)/ flickr)

communications facility. There have also been periodic reports of the special stealth bomber hangars on the island being upgraded in preparation for strikes on Iran's nuclear facilities.

A Scottish newspaper recently [revealed](#) that 387 bunker buster bombs were being shipped to Diego Garcia by the US administration. Although there was some speculation that this could have been in preparation for a possible strike against Iran's controversial nuclear facilities, this seems doubtful. President Obama remains unlikely to authorise such an attack any time soon and the Pentagon has also stated that it would be destabilizing and costly to other efforts in the region. Coupled with General Petraeus' [comment](#) about the timeline having "slid to the right" for a possible Iranian nuclear weapon, it seems more likely that this weapons delivery to Diego Garcia is part of everyday 'just in case' military planning.

Other potential explanations include a re-stocking for Afghanistan missions, where these smaller bunker busters have been used previously (although they hardly fit with the current 'hearts and minds' counter-insurgency strategy), or that the weapons were originally destined for Israel. [One US media report](#), for example, quoting Congressional sources, suggested that the bunker busters had been diverted to Diego Garcia by President Obama as part of an unacknowledged embargo on military equipment for Israel.

British parliamentarians have previously investigated [allegations](#) that the CIA held al-Qaida suspects at one of its "detention without trial" (rendition) prisons on Diego Garcia or on a prison ship off the coast. Despite assurances from the previous US administration to the UK government that this was not the case, in February 2008 British Foreign Secretary David Miliband [admitted](#) that two US extraordinary rendition flights refuelled on Diego Garcia in 2002.

This lack of transparency has recently come under scrutiny by the UK House of Commons Foreign Affairs Committee as part of a wider review of UK-US relations. In a critical [report](#) published on 18 March, the committee called for "a comprehensive review of the current arrangements governing US military use of facilities within the UK and in British Overseas Territories". Sir Menzies Campbell MP, a member of the committee and a former Liberal Democrat leader, [said](#) that "The use of British sovereign territory without restriction is clearly something

which causes great concern. The government has in the past been reluctant to give specific details about the nature of the agreement which governs US occupation. More transparency is unquestionably required".

Pitched against this sorry saga of deceit, duplicity and human rights violations have been a few investigative journalists like John Pilger (see ["stealing a nation"](#)) and civil society groups like the [Peoples Navy](#) and the [Chagossian support group](#). But with only around 850 Chagossians still alive (700 in Mauritius and 150 in the Seychelles), will they ever see justice? The British courts ruled in 2000 that the Chagossians could return to 65 of the islands, but not Diego Garcia. In 2004 the UK government used its '[royal prerogative](#)' to nullify the decision, but the islanders won another battle when the Appeal Court ruled in May 2007 that the right to go home was "one of the most fundamental liberties known to human beings". However, in October 2007 the British House of Lords gave the government permission to challenge this ruling.

The Bush administration argued that even letting the Chagossians return to the other islands would present a security risk – a ludicrous proposition, given that the islands are their home and Diego Garcia, which is between 60 and 100 miles from the other islands, was not included in the proposed return process. With no hint of irony, the US Navy's welcome pack describes Diego Garcia as the "The Footprint of Freedom", and the UK Law Lords were certainly in step in October 2008 when, in an [83-page judgement](#), they ruled by a narrow majority that the Chagossians have no right to return. And that just leaves an ongoing appeal to the [European Court of Human Rights](#).



(Diego Garcia wharf – photo credit: [Serendignity](#)/flickr)

A spokesman for the Chagos Islanders said in a statement before the October 2008 ruling: "The whole Chagossian population was forcibly removed from our homes, our animals were killed and we were dumped, mainly in the slums of Mauritius. We have been treated like slaves". The expulsion of the Chagossians is a classic example of powerful countries doing whatever they feel like. It is a shameful and morally indefensible

episode in US-British history that must be corrected.

On 1 March British MP Diane Abbott tabled an [Early Day Motion \(EDM\)](#) which calls on the UK government to withdraw its case from the European Court of Human Rights, conclude a “friendly settlement” with the Chagossians and make provision for a resettlement of the Chagos islands. To date, the EDM has attracted the support of 55 MPs. Also in March the UK government, backed by several leading science and environmental bodies, proposed turning the Chagos Islands into the world’s largest [marine reserve](#). The proposers claim that any conservation measures would be adjusted in the event of the Chagossians being granted the right to return. But how likely is it that the UK and US governments would agree to re-settlement on Diego Garcia? And what about the [pollution risks](#) from the military activities around the atoll, including the repair, maintenance and weapons supply for US nuclear-powered submarines?

The UK-US agreement for the US to use the island as a joint military base was made in 1966 and is due to expire in 2036. However, either government may opt to terminate the agreement in 2016. In an ideal world, the British and US governments would terminate it by mutual consent, drawdown the military base and arrange for the return of the Chagos islanders and the eventual transfer of sovereignty to Mauritius. However, in the world of *realpolitik* and the continuing ‘war on terror’, it seems unlikely that the US administration will agree to the removal of one of its most strategic assets (despite a [global network of military bases](#) to choose from), or on past evidence, that the UK government would have the backbone to insist that it does so.

(on the beach - photo credit: [Sushicam/flickr](#))



One potential way forward would be for the UK and US to ‘Natoize’ Diego Garcia, in the same way as the US has sought to Natoize its controversial [missile defence deployments in Europe](#). However, such an option would need to meet three vital pre-conditions: a change of

mission; the support of all stakeholders; and proper civilian oversight.

The current US [mission](#) on Diego is to “maintain and operate base facilities for the logistic, service, recreational, and administrative support of US and Allied forces forward deployed to the Indian Ocean and Arabian Gulf”. However, behind this benign sounding statement is the reality that the base has been used for offensive air bombardments using US Air Force B-52s and B-1Bs as well as for the extraordinary rendition of suspected terrorists. Invasion at will of hostile states, torture of captives and indefinite detention without trial have no place in a defensive alliance based on the shared humanitarian and democratic values of its Member States.

Instead, Diego Garcia could become the flagship of NATO transformation and the future hub of fully integrated and multidisciplinary peacekeeping, crisis management and disaster relief operations. It could become a key training and logistical centre for UN-NATO peacekeeping or [R2P](#) missions and/or the [Proliferation Security Initiative](#). A good starting point regarding the latter would be for the UK and US to recognise Diego Garcia as being subject to the [African Nuclear Weapons Free Zone Treaty](#) (as they do for the rest of the Chagos Archipelago).

In short, Diego Garcia could be part of a new vision for NATO, but its exact role and status would need to be carefully debated by all stakeholders, and especially the displaced Chagossians. The UK and US governments could take the opportunity to establish a special joint commission for this purpose, which would include Chagossian representatives as well as envoys from NATO, the Mauritius and potentially other regional stakeholders. The aim would be to draw-up a blueprint acceptable to all parties in time for a handover in 2016.

Finally, any future arrangement would also require mechanisms for proper civilian oversight, including regular verification inspections by NATO parliamentarians (and possibly by international inspectors) of the military facilities on Diego Garcia, as well as full and transparent annual reporting and disclosure of budgetary arrangements.

Could this proposal contribute to a far-sighted and imaginative long-term solution to the running sore in British-American relations that is Diego Garcia? The stolen nation deserves nothing less. What do you think?

Please [write](#) to us at NATO Watch with your views