

## Written evidence submitted by Mr James Rogers (CHA0032)

The Council on Geostrategy is an independent non-profit organisation situated in Westminster. It focuses on shaping British strategic ambition in an international environment increasingly defined by geopolitical competition and the environmental crisis, so that the United Kingdom (UK) is best able to succeed and prosper in the twenty-first century.

1. The author is an established researcher in the area of British geostrategic interests in the Indo-Pacific. He is author of the first contemporary appraisal of British interests in the region, as well as a ream of other articles on the subject.[1]
2. UK sovereignty of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) has come into the spotlight given reports that previous British foreign secretaries accepted that the UK legal case for sovereignty over the islands may now be in jeopardy. This is due to the *advisory* opinion of the International Court of Justice (ICJ) in February 2019 in relation to a case brought by Mauritius and the subsequent decision of the United Nations General Assembly in May 2019 to welcome the ICJ's judgement. (There is also a separate issue pertaining to the treatment of the Chagossians, who were expelled from BIOT when HM Government reserved it for military purposes.)
3. This submission does not relate to the validity of the Mauritian claim or the advisory opinion of the ICJ (or the treatment of the Chagossians). Other sources explain why Mauritius' case can be discounted.[2] Instead, this submission focuses on the geostrategic importance of BIOT to British interests. The geostrategic case should take precedence over all other considerations, particularly in the context of the worsening geopolitical situation in the Indo-Pacific.

### The geostrategic case for continued British sovereignty

1. Located in the western Indo-Pacific, the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) comprises 58 islands including the most well-known island, Diego Garcia. This is the largest of the islands at 30 square kilometres (approximately half of the size of the entire archipelago).
2. Britain gained sovereignty over the islands from France through the Treaty of Paris in 1814. Because of the islands' isolation and the difficulty to sustain human life on them, the islands were uninhabited prior to French possession.
3. For much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the islands remained a strategic backwater due to the fact that Britain could exercise pervasive strategic influence over the Indian Ocean from naval bases in Africa, the Indian subcontinent, South-East Asia and Western Australia.
4. During the mid-20th century, however, this situation began to change:
  - a. Decolonisation forced the UK to surrender most of the naval and air bases it had built around the Indian Ocean during the 19th and 20th centuries;
  - b. The advent of increasingly sophisticated and potent intercontinental bombers and the development and proliferation of missiles extended the ability of opponents to strike Britain's remaining naval and air facilities in the Middle East and South-East Asia (the fall of Singapore in 1942 had proven how vulnerable such bases could be to air power if located in littoral spaces);
  - c. The Soviet threat to the Middle East grew just as the region became more important as an energy supplier to the UK and other Western nations.

5. In this context, Diego Garcia was identified by the United States (US) in the mid-1960s as an excellent location for a large naval and air base. BIOT is many thousands of kilometres from the surrounding continents, meaning it evades, by fact of geography, most short and intermediate range weapons systems.
6. For these reasons, Diego Garcia became home to a large joint UK-US naval, air and space facility. It is frequently described as an ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’ due to its scale and position at the epicentre of the Indian Ocean. Today, it hosts one of the largest air and naval stations to be found anywhere outside of either country. In conjunction with their naval and air forces, it provides Britain and the US with the ability to exercise command over the Indian Ocean.
7. This is because the military facility on Diego Garcia forms part of a ‘strategic array’ which provides the UK with a series of staging posts for military assets moving from the Gulf to South-East Asia and Australia. Conversely, from the opposite direction, it provides a ‘lily pad’ for US assets moving from the Pacific to the Middle East. The lagoon at Diego Garcia can host an entire carrier strike group, while the air base on the island has been used many times to strike targets in the Middle East.
8. Some politicians and analysts have suggested, sometimes hysterically, that a UK loss of sovereignty over the territory (and particularly operational control over the military facility on Diego Garcia) would provide an excellent opportunity for the People’s Republic of China (PRC) to wrest control of it through financial inducement or political pressure, especially if the UK cedes sovereignty to Mauritius – with which the PRC has close economic ties.
9. While this proposition may sound fanciful today, it cannot be ruled out over a longer time frame . Even if the UK were to strike a deal with Mauritius, such as a leaseback agreement for the facility on Diego Garcia, the lease would eventually run out. Domestic politics in Mauritius or Chinese political pressure on the Mauritian government could also compel Mauritius to demand that Britain and the US withdraw.
10. A future Chinese takeover *is* a risk (should the UK decide to relinquish sovereignty), but it should not be central to the British position. Instead, what matters is that HM Government’s 2021 Integrated Review (and its refresh in 2023) identifies the Indo-Pacific as a region of growing significance to the UK’s economy, security, and commitment to supporting open societies. Additionally, it foresaw the Indo-Pacific region becoming a site of ‘intensified geopolitical competition’ or ‘systemic competition’[3].
11. In this context, the PRC’s armed forces, the People’s Liberation Army – particularly the PLA Navy (PLAN) and PLA Air Force – are growing in leaps and bounds. As James Cleverly, the former Foreign Secretary, noted in his speech to Mansion House in 2023:

At this moment, China is carrying out the biggest military build-up in peacetime history. In a period of just 4 years – between 2014 and 2018 – China launched new warships exceeding the combined tonnage of the Royal Navy’s entire active fleet.

He went on:

And as we see this happening; as we watch new bases appearing in the South China Sea and beyond, we are bound to ask ourselves: what is it all for? Why is China making this colossal military investment?[4]

12. Ultimately, it is not known whether Beijing is planning for war. At the very least, the expansion of the PLAN will provide the PRC with considerable geopolitical leverage,

especially as additional logistical vessels are incorporated into the fleet, allowing Chinese warships to be deployed further from home waters for longer periods of time. And even if the Chinese military modernisation and expansion programme slows down, due to its scale the PLAN will still become more potent and geopolitically present in the years ahead.[5]

13. Given the PRC's energy and mineral interests in the Middle East and Africa, British sovereignty over BIOT provides the UK (and US) with a powerful card to check the growth of Chinese power in the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean, and control over it, will also be important in any conflict in the Pacific, including over Taiwan or the South China Sea. As in the past, possession of Diego Garcia, and the surrounding islands forming part of BIOT, provides the UK (and US) with an ideal location from which to coerce opponents or constrain aggressors. So, irrespective of the threat that the facility falls into hostile hands (should Britain cede sovereignty to Mauritius), the UK should retain sovereignty over Diego Garcia.
14. Withdrawal from BIOT also has the potential to reduce the perception of the UK as a trustworthy and capable Indo-Pacific partner in countries such as Australia, Japan, Taiwan, Vietnam and the US. It would rekindle the perception that Britain is in geopolitical retrenchment and decline, just when HM Government is seeking to strengthen British engagement with the region and enhance visibility.
15. In sum, irrespective of any legal or diplomatic implications, it would harm British geostrategic interests to relinquish sovereignty over BIOT.

## Endnotes

[1] See: James Rogers, 'European (British and French) geostrategy in the Indo-Pacific', *Journal of the Indian Ocean Region*, 9:1 (2013). See also: James Rogers, 'AUKUS: Strategic drivers and geopolitical implications', *Britain's World*, 27/01/2022, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/britains-world/> (checked: 30/01/2024); John Hemmings and James Rogers, 'Britain and the Quadrilateral', *Journal of Indo-Pacific Affairs*, 2020 [available at: <https://media.defense.gov/> (checked: 30/01/2024)]; and John Hemmings and James Rogers, 'The South China Sea: Why It Matters To "Global Britain"', Henry Jackson Society, 06/02/2019, <https://henryjacksonsociety.org/> (checked: 30/01/2024).

[2] For a good overview, see: Yuan Yi Zhu, Tom Grant and Richard Ekins, 'Sovereignty and Security in the Indian Ocean', Policy Exchange, 27/10/2023, <https://policyexchange.org.uk/> (checked: 30/01/2024).

[3] 'Global Britain in a Competitive Age: the Integrated Review of Security, Defence, Development and Foreign Policy', Cabinet Office, 07/03/2021, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 30/01/2024) and 'Integrated Review Refresh 2023: Responding to a more contested and volatile world', Cabinet Office, 13/03/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 30/01/2024).

[4] James Cleverly, Speech: 'Our position on China', Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office, 25/04/2023, <https://www.gov.uk/> (checked: 30/01/2024).

[5] Kevin Rowlands and Edward Hampshire, 'The Chinese navy: From minnow to shark', Council on Geostrategy, 07/12/2022, <https://www.geostrategy.org.uk/> (checked: 30/01/2024).

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