

A New Beginning?
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Even as one colony cut itself away last week, Britain was gaining another. The tiny (pop. 1,000), horseshoe-shaped atoll of Diego Garcia* may not be another Rhodesia, but in the long run it could play a crucial role in Britain's defense.

A palm-topped flyspeck in the Indian Ocean 1,100 miles southwest of Ceylon, Diego Garcia is the first in a series of four strategically located islets that may ultimately buttress Britain's "farflung battle line" of bases (see map). Along with the Seychelle atolls of Aldabra (pop. 100), Farquhar (172) and Des Roches (112), Diego Garcia & Co. will make up a new colony called the British Indian Ocean Territory. Their cost to Britain: \$8,400,000 in remuneration for commercial facilities, mainly copra sheds and fishing fleets.

Transistorized Bases. The purchase of Diego Garcia came after a two-year survey by an Anglo-American mission that has been combing the Indian Ocean for suitable communications, staging and refueling sites. Britain's biggest bases east of Suez are in jeopardy—Aden, with its 14,000 men, is expected to become unusable in two years due to Arab pressure; Singapore-Malaysia, with 51,000 men and the best strategic location in Southeast Asia, is likely to be evacuated by 1970 at the latest, depending partly on how great a threat Indonesia continues to pose in its confrontation with Malaysia.

Both bases put a tremendous strain on Britain's badly stretched economy: Aden costs \$168 million a year to maintain, Singapore and Malaysia \$630 million. Whitehall planners, currently preparing next February's defense review under the most stringent of cost-accounting standards, are confronted with a knotty dilemma. Britain must pare its projected 1970 defense costs from \$6.7 billion to \$5.6 billion; at the same time, the "ghastly blank" in the thin red line of defenses that will exist between Europe and Hong Kong must be filled if Britain is to meet her responsibilities in foreign policy, and provide support for her allies.

One plan—and Diego Garcia fits it nicely—is for a string of "transistorized" bases stretching across the Indian Ocean, with anchors in Europe and Australia. Minimally, these bases would be way stations that bristle with communications antennas, replete with docks for Britain's three Polaris subs and three aircraft carriers, and landing strips for bombers. Maximally, they could be missile sites.

Material Sharing. As the review board currently sees Britain's future defense posture, the 62,000-man Army of the Rhine must be maintained. Not only does it fill Britain's NATO ground commitment and give London a foothold in continental Europe, but also serves as a kind of strategic reserve which Britain uses to shuttle forces into African and Middle Eastern trouble spots. The foreign exchange costs are high (\$504 million a year), but the West Germans during the past year have come a long way toward offsetting those costs, and the British facilities in Germany would be extremely costly to duplicate elsewhere. Other bases to be maintained, although perhaps on a somewhat reduced scale: Hong Kong (7,000 men costing \$42 million), Cyprus (13,000 men, \$48 million).

Both Labor and the Tories are divided on the question. Despite the Conservatives' traditions of empire, Tory Enoch Powell, shadow defense minister to Party Chief Ted Heath, declared at the Conservatives' Brighton conference last month that he favored a complete British pullback east of Suez. Though powerful Tory voices rise in dissent, Heath seems to agree,

preferring a policy that focuses less on Asia and more on Europe. For different reasons ("Why should we support the U.S. in Viet Nam?"), Labor's far left shares the desire to cut back empire commitments. But not Prime Minister Harold Wilson, who seems determined to hold up Britain's end in Asia, so long as it seems possible. "We will maintain our position east of Suez," he told a friend last month. Diego Garcia may mark a new beginning in that resolve.

* Discovered for Spain in 1532 by the Portuguese navigator of the same name, Diego Garcia was administered as part of the British colony of Mauritius, which is due for independence in 1966.

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