

Basing Rights and Contested Sovereignty in Greenland and Diego Garcia

The Impact of Decolonization on US and Allied Access in the Era of Great Power Competition

A CNA Event Note

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Summary

On August 21, 2019, CNA's Strategy and Policy Analysis program hosted an on-the-record event to discuss how recent developments in sovereignty politics could affect US military basing rights around the world, particularly in Greenland and Diego Garcia. Both are currently part of US allies' territories—the former as a constituent within the Kingdom of Denmark and the latter as the largest island in the British Indian Ocean Territory—but the status of either one (or both) could change, if Mauritius successfully pressures the UK to cede Diego Garcia, or if Greenland acquires its independence. The event featured CNA senior vice president Mr. Mark Rosen, CNA analyst Dr. Steven Wills, and Ms. Rachel Ellehuus, deputy director of the Center for Strategic and International Studies' Europe program. Ms. Nilanthi Samaranayake, director of CNA's Strategy and Policy Analysis program, moderated the conversation. Panelists appraised recent developments with Greenland and Diego Garcia in their historical perspective, as well as the strategic and operational advantages of US access to the two locations. Discussants noted that the bases are key enablers of US military missions, from force projection to submarine tracking, yet agreed that the US approach to basing could benefit from both a greater appreciation of long-term strategic needs and a more concerted effort to make US bases acceptable to local populations and their governments.

Key Points of the Discussion

- **Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia and Thule Air Base remain immensely valuable to the US military as it seeks to execute its missions in a new era of great power competition.** The missions tasked to Diego Garcia and Thule Air Base may have changed since they were established in the Cold War, but they remain vital as the US projects force overseas, monitors other great powers, and minimizes risks to deterrence.
- **The choices that the US and its allies make in both regions could set dangerous precedents for adversaries to exploit in their own sovereignty-related causes.** Appearing to downplay the International Court of Justice's (ICJ's) recent advisory opinion on Diego Garcia risks undercutting US efforts to encourage the rule of law, especially in the South China Sea.
- **Engaging in dialogue directly with local populations and leaders can pay dividends.** The United States should engage with populations who claim sovereignty over territories such as Greenland and the Chagos Islands in search of a modus vivendi that continues US military access while recognizing that others have ultimate authority over the land on which US bases are built. Doing so may be difficult, but it will both make US bases more secure politically and bring US actions in line with rhetoric on the value of the rule of law.
- **Economic benefits are essential means of making US bases welcome in other countries.** As illustrated by recent controversy between President Trump and the Danish government, officials have been reminded of the strategic importance of Greenland and the risk posed by underinvestment. Yet, proposals to buy the territory risk spending the money in the wrong place. Instead of trying to buy sovereignty, the US could significantly improve the bases' political viability if it ensured that local populations displaced or affected by the base had clear economic stakes in its existence.

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- **US military planners would do well to take longer-term views of the value of investments and installations.** Instead of heeding the call of short-term pressures, planners would benefit from considering the long-term benefits of seemingly unnecessary investments or spending, and the long-term needs that might justify retaining access to a base that has lost its near-term importance. For example, after the Cold War, the US gave up several bases that appeared unnecessary but would be valuable today amid competition with Russia and China.

Discussion

Historical and Future Importance

Both the installation at Diego Garcia and Air Base Thule grew out of American strategic needs in an age of great power competition. While US presence in both locations has been continuous since each base's establishment, they are likely to undergo a renaissance in strategic value over the coming years.

Throughout the Second World War, Greenland served as an essential transiting base for planes flying from US factories to the European front. As the Cold War chilled US-Soviet relations, the US established Thule Air Base in 1951 as the linchpin in its early-warning system and as a base for surveillance flights of the Soviet Union. Climate change is making Greenland and the Arctic ever more important, both economically and militarily. Wills observed that, while the US has some other basing options around the Norwegian Sea, the Greenland-Iceland-UK gap will remain a vital strategic chokepoint. Russia's development of submarine-launched cruise missiles and the importance of transatlantic seafloor cables give Russian submarines real reasons to try slipping into the Atlantic and give the US and its allies real incentives to maintain bases in both Iceland and Greenland for antisubmarine aircraft patrols.

Diego Garcia became part of the global constellation of US bases in 1971, when it became a communications base. As noted by CNA Senior Fellow Rear Admiral Michael McDevitt, USN (Ret.), the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan gave the island greater importance because of the fear that the Soviets would keep on going and invade Iran in order to gain control of the Strait of Hormuz. Over time, it became a base with maintenance facilities, airstrips, and prepositioned logistics ships capable of responding to contingencies from Korea to Kuwait. As the US aims to draw down its military presence in Afghanistan and the Gulf, Diego Garcia might appear to be less vital today than in years past. Nevertheless, discussants emphasized that the centrally located Diego Garcia would, like Greenland, become even more important in the coming years. In the case of Diego Garcia, it is because of the growing Chinese investment and activity in the Indian Ocean and because the relative isolation of Diego Garcia affords the US a significant amount of freedom to launch operations with almost no monitoring.

Setting an Inadvertent Precedent

Navigating sovereignty politics sits at the heart of US anxieties about both Greenland and Diego Garcia. In both cases, the consequences go well beyond the maintenance of US military access; they extend to other flashpoints in the sovereignty disputes impacting the US, China, and Russia. In Greenland, sovereignty politics have global implications because of the emerging approach to Arctic sea lanes. Should the Arctic be managed by states or as a global commons? According to the Convention on the Law of the Sea, only a small portion of the Arctic is legally high seas and beyond the control of a single country. However, China recently issued a white paper calling for greater global governance in the Arctic and has acquired observer status on the Arctic Council. Consequently, there are strategic as well as economic considerations. Ellehuus and Rosen warned that managing the Arctic is the legal prerogative of Arctic littoral states and that changes in the legal regime could set an adverse precedent that China could exploit in the South China Sea context.

Diego Garcia presents different, but no less difficult, choices for the US. Notwithstanding historical US concerns over formal international adjudication schemes, Washington is committed to upholding a rules-based international order, and has endorsed the international arbitration ruling that repudiated expansive Chinese claims in the South China Sea. However, in 2019, the ICJ issued an advisory opinion encouraging the UK to complete decolonization and return the Chagos Islands to Mauritius. The UN General Assembly subsequently voted 116-6 in support of the ICJ’s advisory opinion, with key US allies such as France and Germany abstaining from, rather than opposing, the measure. The UK, however, has made no move to comply and appears to have no plans to do so. The US has reaffirmed its support for UK sovereignty.¹

The discussants agreed that the US frequently sets a less than ideal example on this issue. Ellehuus noted that the US often plays the game of accepting legal decisions on some occasions but ignoring or rejecting international law on others. This is perhaps most evident with the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, which the US often cites to Russia, but still has not yet ratified. Rosen concurred, noting that it is deeply in the interest of the US to champion the rule of law: “Smaller states have to use the rule of law; they don’t have large armies. And we want them to use the rule of law.” However, he noted that for this to work, the US must take the bad with the good, and accept both victories and setbacks in international legal tribunals.

The Dividends of Engagement

While relations have been fraught between the relevant parties in the cases of both Diego Garcia and Greenland, US recognition of and engagement with indigenous claims to sovereignty would pay significant dividends. Relations between Greenland and Denmark have been rocky at times, even since Greenland acquired home-rule in 1979, while US relations with both countries have been strained by their opposition to US nuclear weapons, which the US reportedly tried to bury under Greenland’s ice in the 1950s and which a B-52 was carrying when it crashed at Thule in 1968. The situation is even more complex in Diego Garcia, where the US has allowed the United Kingdom to endure most of the fallout. Anger over the detachment of Diego Garcia from the British crown colony of Mauritius shortly before Mauritius gained independence in 1968 is compounded by British evictions of Chagossians between 1968 and 1971 to make way for the US base. The evictions and UK sovereignty over the islands have come under increasing legal challenge in this century. Rosen observed that Britain’s failure to deliver on promises made during negotiations over splitting the Chagos Islands, particularly that Mauritian fishermen would have access to waters in the Chagos Archipelago, surely contributed to Mauritius’ eagerness to challenge the status quo.

Both Danish and US relations significantly improved as a result of engaging with the Greenlanders who have sovereignty over their land and natural resources, although there is more to be done. Denmark has devolved ever-more powers to Greenlanders since home-rule was granted in 1979, including self-rule in 2009, and recognizes Greenland’s ultimate desire for independence. The US has also made progress in improving relations with Greenlanders. As a veteran of US negotiations with Greenland, Ellehuus offered an insider’s perspective. The 1951 basing agreement is the only written agreement governing US presence at Thule; everything not covered by that document is based on conversations and informal agreements. As she noted, this has fostered real engagement with Greenlanders, if only out of necessity: “Because nothing is written down, you have to take people at their word and count on their good will.” Ellehuus noted that President Trump’s cancelled trip would have represented the first time that the prime ministers of the three polities of the Kingdom of Denmark would have met simultaneously with an American president.²

¹ US Department of State, “The United States Recognizes the United Kingdom’s Continued Sovereignty Over the British Indian Ocean Territory: Press Statement,” Morgan Ortugas, Department Spokesperson, May 6, 2019.

² Denmark, the Faroe Islands, and Greenland.

Ellehuus emphasized that the lesson of Greenland for Diego Garcia is that the US and UK ultimately cannot ignore indigenous voices, and that engaging with them is the best way of ensuring that the US continues to enjoy access to Diego Garcia. Rosen strongly agreed, noting that “we are the consumers of this wonderful piece of geography, but we are not the owner.” In his analysis, the best solution would be for the British government to give the US the go-ahead to begin negotiations with Mauritius to find a solution that establishes greater Mauritian control over the islands and guarantees US retention of the Diego Garcia base, all while being politically feasible for the Mauritian and Chagossian peoples.

Investing in Relationships

This event took place as US-Danish-Greenlandic relations were thrust into the spotlight by news reports about President Trump’s interest in buying Greenland from Denmark. Instead of buying territory, the discussants agreed that the US government would best use its money by investing in the goodwill of sovereign local populations. The local option might not be the cheapest one when filling a construction or supply contract, but, as Rosen noted, using the higher-wage locals should be seen as “the cost of doing business.” Throughout the world, giving local populations and sovereign governments an economic incentive to support US basing is the clearest way to ensure that political tides run with, rather than against, US military presence.

As in the case of engagement, efforts to give Greenlanders a greater economic stake in Thule have been reasonably effective. This is helped by the fact that there are relatively few other economic opportunities in Greenland, so they have (and would have, in an independent state) a strong incentive to preserve US bases. However, the US is not and will not be the only investor in Greenland with a strategic-military eye. Rear Admiral McDevitt mused that China’s “SLOC anxiety” plus the increasing importance of the Northern Sea route could result in a Chinese effort to acquire a base that its navy could use to look after its ships exiting from the Northern Sea route. In short, Beijing’s interests in Greenland may be broader than just access to resources.

The US has not done a good enough job of making Mauritians invested in US presence in Diego Garcia. Although the DOD sought to use local supplies and labor through the 1980s, that effort fell off. Economic investment and opportunities for Mauritians could develop connections with the local community, compensate for lost fishing rights and evictions, and thus serve as the key that would enable the US to hold onto this precious piece of real estate.

Underscoring the value of engagement with and investment in local relationships, Rosen commented that he has heard anecdotally in his research that the Mauritian government would not be opposed to a continued US presence at Diego Garcia provided Mauritius had a seat at the table and benefited economically. Indeed, Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth of Mauritius has indicated a willingness to negotiate with the US.³

Adopting a Long-Term Approach to Installations and Investments

This discussion produced two important takeaways for US defense planners who are developing concepts and plans to move away from dependence on fixed-shore positions to more flexible response timelines. The first is the importance of taking a 20- or 30-year perspective—what Rosen called China’s view—when assessing whether to give up a base which does not have an immediate or near-term purpose. Drawing on his experience working on US base closures as an international maritime lawyer, he remarked that the US has sacrificed irreplaceable real estate in short-term fits of downsizing, such as the extremely long pier at Naval

³ United Nations General Assembly Plenary, “General Assembly Welcomes International Court of Justice Opinion on Chagos Archipelago, Adopts Text Calling for Mauritius’ Complete Decolonization,” Seventy-Third Session, GA/12146, May 22, 2019, <https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga12146.doc.htm>.



Communication Station Harold E. Holt. As an analyst in attendance pointed out, however, retaining bases for the long term may be hard to square with budget limits and high maintenance costs.

The second takeaway is the importance of monetary investments that may seem strictly unnecessary, but in fact are crucial for creating a good relationship with the host government and local populations. Citing an example from Greenland, Ellehuus noted that the US refusal to pay for the cleanup of nuclear waste is one such example: “Just because you don’t *have* to pay for it, doesn’t mean it’s not a respectful thing you can do that’s in your own interest as well.” Likewise, the DOD’s transition to lower-footprint military bases around the world could actually produce more resistance to US military presence among locals because a decrease in troop counts and families means less economic benefit to make up for noise and use restrictions.

Conclusions

This timely discussion offered a clear conclusion: the US would be well served by engaging economically and politically with local populations. Not only would this increase the credibility of US claims to champion a rules-based international order, but it also might make US military access to vital strategic locations around the world more secure. However, there are some unanswered questions: To what extent can the US better leverage multilateralism as part of these investments? Also, how might adversaries get a vote to stymie or sabotage US efforts to build better relations with the people and polities who govern or claim the land on which US bases stand?

The event was designed to offer expert appraisals of and suggestions for the ongoing political and military challenges presented by the tension between the United States’ strategic and operational military needs in a new era of great power competition and its commitment to championing a rules-based international order. For more information on this event or the Strategy and Policy Analysis program (www.cna.org/strategy), please contact Ms. Nilanthi Samaranayake (nilanthi@cna.org).