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U.S. Naval Base in Indian Ocean Nearing Completion

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LONDON—Completion of the U.S. naval base on the British-owned island of Diego Garcia in the Indian Ocean is now due in 1981, 10 years after work began. The job, carried out by the Seabees, the construction engineers of the U.S. Navy, is one of the largest peacetime tasks they have undertaken.

The work has involved building an airfield with a 12,000-foot runway at which a squadron of P-3 Orion maritime patrol aircraft are already based. Another major job still under way is a mile-long jetty in which an estimated seven miles of concrete-filled steel pilings are being laid. The jetty will allow a carrier task group to be based in the lagoon that forms the heart of the 10-mile-long and three-mile-wide island.

Other tasks have included building 17 miles of roads, warehouses, a radio station, eight large fuel tanks, an air-conditioned barracks for 600 men, a club, sports grounds, a swimming pool and a Navy exchange.

The total population of the island is 1,200, of whom all but a score are U.S. sailors while the remainder are the small Royal Navy party whose senior officer, a lieutenant commander, is also the island's administrator and magistrate.

Diego Garcia lies about 2,600 miles from Bahrain in the Persian Gulf, 2,100 miles from Aden at the entrance to the Red Sea, and 2,000 miles from the Strait of Malacca, the main eastern entrance for shipping to the Indian Ocean.

When the base is completed it will be the only one in the Indian Ocean from which U.S. warships can operate freely and should go some way to offset Soviet plans to build up a base at Umm-Qasr in Iraq, at the head of the Persian Gulf. It may also provide a staging post for U.S. Air Force transport planes.

Although the Soviets would be much closer to hand to bring pressure to bear on the gulf oil states, from the U.S. point of view the confined waters of the gulf make it unsuitable for operating large aircraft carriers. The importance of Diego Garcia is that it

will enable the Americans to keep a carrier task group off the gulf for long periods at a time of tension whereas at present the enormous job of keeping a task group supplied from the nearest base at Subic Bay, 6,000 miles away in the Philippines, necessarily restricts the time a large number of warships can remain in the gulf area.

Since the Royal Navy has a token party of sailors on the island, there seems no doubt that there will be few difficulties about Royal Navy task groups' using the base. Its completion should aid current plans to reintroduce a small permanent British naval presence east of Suez, something which the Americans would welcome.

Another advantage that Diego Garcia offers is freedom from any constraints imposed by a host nation, as the Soviets experienced in Somalia when they were thrown out of the huge base they had established at Berbera in 1977. Moscow could also face similar problems in Iraq, given the volatile state of Middle East politics, as could the Americans, since their token three-ship squadron in the gulf at present relies on base fa-

cilities at Bahrain.

Although the U.N. General Assembly in 1971 and again in 1972 voted in favor of establishing a so-called "zone of peace" in the Indian Ocean so that the warships of external powers would be banned, the Soviets have ignored it and have steadily increased the size of their squadron there, which earlier this year numbered 20 ships.

If current demands in U.S. naval circles for a new Indian Ocean 5th Fleet are approved, the first two major ships to be deployed there late this year will be the 39,300-ton amphibious assault ship Tarawa, equipped with British-built Harrier fighters as well as helicopters and about 1,900 marines, and the 18,000-ton Tripoli, which carries four Harriers and 1,700 marines. The presence of marines and troop-carrying helicopters with close air support provided by the Harriers would lend weight to the assertion by U.S. Defense Secretary Harold Brown that America might be forced to intervene militarily in the event of a future threat to oil supplies from the gulf.