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Cocos (Keeling) Islands: paradise one day... stolen the next...

Before March 2012, most

Australians would not have heard of the Cocos Islands unless they made the mandatory stopover on the way to Christmas Island, 900 kms to the north-east. However, most Cocos people would prefer to remain unknown.

Background

The Cocos (Keeling) Islands consist of 27 coral islands. They have a land area of only 14 square kilometres and are 2,950 kilometres north-west of Perth and 3,700 kilometres west of Darwin in the Indian Ocean. They became an Australian Territory in 1955¹. Though nominally a British territory between 1858 and 1955, and administered as a British possession, they were transferred by a British act of Parliament to Australia. These tiny islands were ruled for 150 years as a private fiefdom of the Clunies-Ross family. Uninhabited until 1826, Alexander Hare, a former minor British colonial official, settled there with about 50 slaves, mainly of Malay background, and a personal 'harem' collected from many colonial outposts².

Promoted to tourists as 'Australia's unspoilt paradise', workers from the mainland value the laid-back lifestyle of the islands. But the location is increasingly valuable for other reasons. Though locals feel they are not really wanted, they know they are strategically significant.

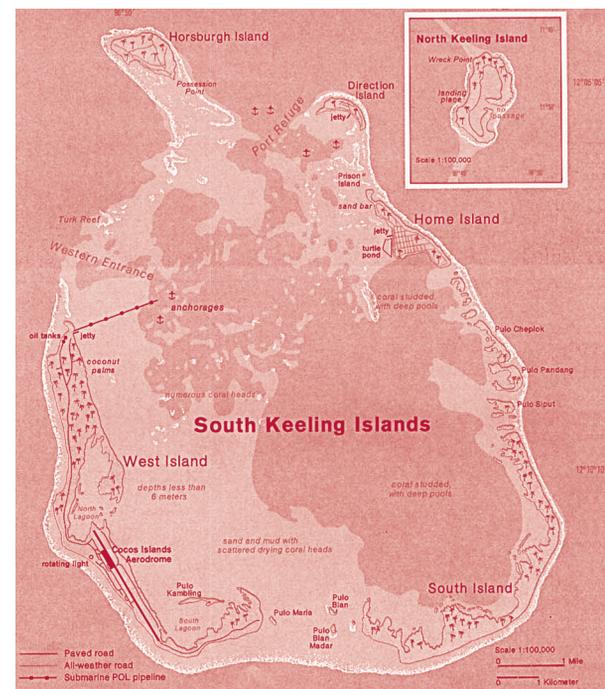
'We are like an unsinkable aircraft carrier and for some people in Canberra that is our worth.'³

Kenneth Chan, Cocos Islands Administrator (1983-85) admitted in 1987 that the islands' strategic location was the main motivation to acquire and

integrate this Indian Ocean territory⁴.

During World Wars I and II, the islands were strategically important to Australia as a communications and transport link across the Indian Ocean. Allied forces occupied the islands for most of the war and were under military administration from 1944-1946. Two airstrips were built on the Cocos for Australian and Dutch bomber squadrons that ran raids on Japanese targets in South East Asia during World War II. Later, after the islands were transferred to Australia, they were used as a refuelling stop by Qantas for its flights to and from South Africa⁵.

Now recent reports suggest that the USA Pentagon is viewing these islands as a possible new base for its unmanned aircraft or drones which have been used indiscriminately in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen and Somalia⁶. Because of America's military build-up in south-east Asia the use of the remote Cocos-Keeling Islands as a possible base for US surveillance aircraft becomes more attractive⁷. The US currently has an air and naval base on the even more remote British island territory of Diego Garcia, but with little room for expansion and with the lease expiring in 2016. Because the lease on Diego Garcia is ending in 2016, the USA is looking eastward and wanting to relocate at least some of its military functions to various Australian bases in Western Australia, Darwin and the Cocos Islands. It wants the islands as a base for drones and other spy planes. The Diego Garcia base was built in the 1970's after 2000 Chagos Islanders were forcibly removed through trickery and starvation. The US has used Diego



Garcia as a base for nuclear weapons, marines, warships, bombers and spy planes. It has used it as a transit station for political prisoners sent for 'rendition' to other countries so they can be tortured, though this is officially denied. Diego Garcia is a strategic hub of the US killing machine. The British expelled the inhabitants of Diego Garcia so that the US could establish its military base.

Aircraft based in the Cocos Islands would be well positioned to launch spy flights over the South China Sea and would now be considered as the replacement for the American Diego Garcia air base⁸.

Local Concerns

Talk of establishing a drone base on the Territory has concerned local people. The Australian Coalition 'absolutely'

supports the use of such a base for US drones. Its defense spokesperson has reportedly said he is 'very keen that we welcome the Americans in any shape or form that they want to come and work with us in our region'⁹.

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History repeating itself!!

One deep concern is whether the residents of Cocos Island been consulted or considered? It could be a repeat of the tragedy of the Chagossian people of Diego Garcia when the entire population was forced to leave their homeland, between 1966 and 1971, to make way for a massive US air base. They've never been allowed to return or been fairly compensated.¹¹

Cocos Island community members were allegedly told that it would not happen in their lifetimes. This is true if they have a short life-span as the lease on Diego Garcia ends in 2016.

Local concerns are well founded when we recall that between 1966 and 1971, the British and Americans forced the entire population of the Indian Ocean atoll of Diego Garcia to leave their homeland to make way for a massive US air base. The Cocos Islands are home to about 600 people and many are concerned that their home will be turned into a military base.

'They go to war a lot. I think if they come here, they will do what they like.'¹²

Risks

We need to consider the kind of footprint any military presence would make. That footprint consists in destruction of the environment, disregard of rights of indigenous and local people, souring of relationships with our regional

neighbours and the negative social impact on the local community.

Australia's continuing and deepening military alliance with the USA has already seen US marines based in Darwin, in the Northern Territory¹³. This alliance could include unmanned aircraft (drones) that would use Cocos (Keeling) Islands as well as aircraft carriers and nuclear-powered attack submarines based in Perth as part of efforts to refocus American defence resources in the region. All these can also make the seas/oceans in the region toxic as has occurred in Guam. Who cleans up?

- As Australia has good relations with China and India, a base for US drone aircraft would not be in Australia's national interest. So, why antagonise our regional neighbours which are also our valuable trading partners? Indonesia and China, will regard the creation of the US drone base as an unfriendly act. This is in addition to the joint military base in Darwin, another unfriendly message to Asia.
- Would Australia have a choice as to whether or not to be involved in any future war involving the US?
- Australia should be banning and condemning the manufacture of drones as it should landmines and cluster munitions.

The former Australian ambassador to the United Nations, Richard Woolcott, has said that militarising the Cocos Islands would be a betrayal of verbal undertakings given to the United Nations, 'There was nothing from us in writing, but verbal undertakings were given.'

Woolcott was concerned that these two 'crumbs' from the British Empire – Cocos (Keeling) and Christmas Islands – were now being misused and so will damage Australia's standing in the Asia region vis-à-vis asylum seekers and militarisation.¹⁴

Social Impact

There may be some financial benefit particularly in the form of a booming sex industry (as occurred in the Philippines, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan) around the American bases.

The population of the Bikini Islands was removed following atomic destruction and radiation. The population of Guam is dispossessed and dealing with contaminated land and water due to the presence of US nuclear-powered ships.

As with the militarisation of Guam and the attempts to build a missile base on Jeju Island (South Korea) this would be another spear pointing at China. In its 4,000+ years, China has persistently demonstrated it will trade for resources rather than to invade.

Questions

The Cocos Islands are Australia's only Muslim-majority territory. Will they be given a say in what happens on their home?

Why do Australian governments continue to aid US military expansion and exceptionalism in the region?

What will happen to the people of the Cocos Islands given US tendencies to displace people who do not have the ability or capacity to resist? The Chagossian people were removed from Diego Garcia to the Seychelles and Mauritius to live marginalised lives away from their Island of birth.

The Chagossian people, a people with their own culture and economy were totally displaced and marginalised in a foreign land and the ecosystem of that island destroyed in many parts.

The Chagossian people of Diego Garcia have lost their homeland. Will the people of these idyllic islands also find their homeland stolen for unworthy causes? As with the people of Guam, Jeju Island, Diego Garcia, will the people of Cocos (Keeling) Islands be so quietly disregarded?

Full set of resources and references are on the ERC website www.erc.org.au



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