

THROUGH THE CHAGOS ARCHIPELAGO DEAL: SIGNIFICANCE AND IMPLICATIONS

RADHEY TAMBI

The transfer of sovereignty of the Chagos archipelago back to Mauritius by the United Kingdom on October 3, 2024, was a consequential and historic development for the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). For more than six decades, along with its residents, the Chagossians, the status of this archipelago has been locked between the territorial claims of the United Kingdom, the former colonial power and the landlord; the defence and military interests of the lessee, the US and the mother country, Mauritius. The agreement reached has been welcomed by all the major stakeholders, including India, which is a residential and rising power in the Indian Ocean.

However, what remains to be seen and understood is the significance of this timely deal when the regional and extra-regional players are revisiting and recalibrating the Indian Ocean in their wider Indo-Pacific strategy which is congruent with the belligerent rise of China, another Asian player in the same geography. In this context, this article will partially shed some light on the historical context of the acquisition of the Chagos archipelago where the US

Ms **Radhey Tambi** is a Research Associate at the Centre for Air Power Studies, New Delhi.

houses its most secretive base since the Cold War, and its relevance. Further, it will delve into the importance of this base in the current geopolitical context for the important stakeholders of the region, including India. Lastly, it will conclude by shedding some light on the implications of the arrangement reached.

MAPPING THE PAST OF DIEGO GARCIA

The saga of the incomplete decolonisation of Mauritius, an island country in the southwest Indian Ocean, was a story in the making much before the actual independence of Port Louis on March 12, 1968. While London was deciding to draw the curtain on its engagements in the East by decolonising various countries in East Africa and Asia, Washington, on the other hand, was exploring the possibility of the best suitable military base at the peak of the Cold War under the “Strategic Island Concept”¹ since the early 1950s—a military facility that would be both geographically and strategically suited for the US to conduct operations in Africa, Asia, and the Middle East. After dropping several names from a list of 60,² the Chagos archipelago in the central Indian Ocean appeared to be the most suitable option for the geostrategic needs of Washington and to fill the security void left by Britain.

In August 1964, a joint military team from the UK and the US visited the island and sealed the deal that changed the face of the archipelago forever. The coloniser England was made responsible for the acquisition of the land, resettlement, and compensation to the population, while Washington was to be responsible for building and maintaining the military infrastructure. As the negotiations were in progress, care was taken to keep them shrouded in secrecy, in both the British and Mauritian Parliaments, as the two sides concluded³ the agreement through the Lancaster House Agreement. The only

-
1. Committee on Foreign Affairs (UK Parliament), “Submission from Richard Gifford, Legal Representative, Chagos Refugees Group”, July 6, 2008, House of Commons - Foreign Affairs - Written Evidence. Accessed on October 20, 2024.
 2. Ibid.
 3. International Court of Justice, “Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965— The Court finds that the process of decolonization of Mauritius was not lawfully completed when that country acc”, 2019, <http://www.icj-cij.org/node/105780>. Accessed on October 20, 2024.

exception to this was the Exchange of Notes⁴ in public in 1966 that declared the use of Diego Garcia, one of the largest islands of the Chagos archipelago, by the US as a military facility for an initial period of 50 years, with an extension of a further 20 years. Apart from the fact that such a lease agreement by the UK would reflect its showmanship to the US, the former also received a discount of \$14 million⁵ on the US made Polaris missile (the US Navy's first submarine-launched ballistic missile) to fulfill its nuclear deterrent⁶ obligations of being a North Atlantic Treaty Organisation (NATO) member.

DIEGO GARCIA: FROM THE COLD WAR TILL THE PRESENT

Developed to help the US strategic missions through the naval and aviation branches, the military base at Diego Garcia played an active role during the Cold War when the US Navy's Anti-Submarine Warfare (ASW) aircraft tracked⁷ the Soviet submarines in the Indian Ocean. After the end of the Cold War in 1991, the base was instrumentalised⁸ in supporting US Air Force bombers and tankers involved in combat missions in West Asia. Old satellite imageries⁹ taken in the mid-2000s have shown nuclear-capable aircraft such as the B-2 and B-52 stationed at the aircraft parking ramp in Diego Garcia. Not only nuclear-capable aircraft but nuclear-powered submarines¹⁰ have routinely been docked at the base. To this end, the island territory has also been used to fly combat missions in South Asia. The importance of "Camp Thunder Cove"¹¹ (the name of the US military complex on Diego Garcia) goes beyond the military dimension, as it

-
4. British Indian Ocean Territory, "History". Accessed on October 21, 2024.
 5. Nitya Labh, "Why Diego Garcia Matters?", *Foreign Policy*, May 30, 2024. Accessed on October 15, 2024.
 6. William James, "There and Back Again: The Fall and Rise of Britain's 'East of Suez' Basing Strategy", *War on the Rocks*, February 18, 2021. Accessed on October 10, 2024.
 7. Michael Mcdevitt, "America's Interest in Diego Garcia", *War on the Rocks*, June 3, 2020. Accessed on October 11, 2024.
 8. Ibid.
 9. "Diego Garcia", Global Security, Satellite Imagery. Accessed on October 8, 2024.
 10. Michael Doan, "USS Florida Moors Alongside USS Emory S. Land in Diego Garcia", Submarine Force Pacific, U.S. Pacific Fleet, January 11, 2016, <https://www.csp.navy.mil/Media/News-Articles/Display-News/Article/642267/uss-florida-moors-alongside-uss-emory-s-land-in-diego-garcia/>. Accessed on October 9, 2024.
 11. J. Vitor Tossini, "The British Indian Ocean Territory – An Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier in the Form of Diego Garcia", *UK Defence Journal*, September 1, 2018. Accessed on October 11, 2024.

hosts one of the four dedicated ground antenna for the operation of the Global Positioning System (GPS) and is also considered one of the 33 emergency landing sites for the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) space programmes.

Also known as the 'Malta of the Indian Ocean', the significance of Diego Garcia has further doubled down for the US amidst the evolving dynamics of the Indian Ocean. On one side, the region has been witnessing the flexing of Chinese military muscle in the IOR since 2008, whilst, on the other, the political instability in West Asia and around the Horn of Africa continues to embroil the region with the threat of rising piracy and other non-traditional challenges. Beijing's presence in the IOR is no longer momentary or sporadic, rather, it is intended to become a 'regular' and 'normal' affair. The activity which began with bringing destroyers and warships under the mask of fighting piracy, has gone ahead to include submarines post 2014, and now witnesses a frequent presence of Chinese survey or research vessels that are involved in mapping the Indian Ocean sea floor.

While during the Cold War, it was the Soviet presence that the US wanted to counter, in the 21st century, it is likely to be China that is considered the peer competitor of Washington and the only country that can challenge the US' primacy in the global order, both economically and militarily. Further, unlike during the Cold War, when India and the US were on a different page regarding the military presence of extra-regional players in the Indian Ocean,¹² today, New Delhi has increasingly come to terms with the reality that it is difficult for a single country to manage the vast expanse of the IOR. Hence, it is seen drawing convergences with various regional and extra-regional countries like the US, Japan, Australia, France, and others. To this end, New Delhi played a seminal role in the backdoor negotiations concerning the Chagos deal between the UK and Mauritius, which is well acknowledged by both stakeholders. Thereby also pointing out that New Delhi now (unlike in the past) welcomes Washington's continued military presence in Diego Garcia

12. During the Cold War, India wanted the Indian Ocean to be declared as the 'Zone of Peace', while other permanent members, apart from China, did not support the move in the UN Security Council.

which will help in maintaining the balance of power amidst the rising Chinese strategic and military activities, which have become a source of concern for many in the region and beyond.

According to Dr. Walter Ludwig, during the hearing in the Foreign Affairs Sub-committee on the Overseas Territory, House of Commons (UK), the base in Diego Garcia has several unique advantages for the U.S. First, it allows for the rapid deployment of the forces, as one-third of America's pre-positioned military forces are based here; second, it supports long-range air operations; and third, the distinctiveness of this base is due to its central location in the IOR, which restricts the distribution of assets and resources in various places like Djibouti where already the bases of 11 countries exist cheek by jowl. Instead, it gives the upper hand to Washington to be present throughout the Indian Ocean: the west (Djibouti, Oman), central (Diego Garcia) and east (Australia).¹³ Moreover, the hold on this strategic location reflects the US' commitment¹⁴ to the region, its allies, and its global relationships.

The uniqueness and vitality of this pivotal U.S. base in the heart of the Indian Ocean is undoubtedly a source of security for U.S. partners and allies. But it is also a brilliant step undertaken by all the major stakeholders (India, Mauritius, the UK, and the U.S.) to prevent any untoward activity by China. In a statement released by China while marking 50 years of diplomatic relations between Beijing and Port Louis, the former equated the previous position of Chagos with Taiwan on the issue of territorial integrity.¹⁵ If the U.S. can take Chagos illegally by not accepting any of the international jurisdictions and opinions, then there is nothing that stops Beijing from unifying Taiwan under the 'One China' principle.

13. Foreign Affairs Sub-Committee on the Overseas Territory (House of Commons, UK), "Questions 1-48, Witnesses", February 28, 2024, committees.parliament.uk/oralevidence/14354/html/. Accessed on November 1, 2024.

14. Stacy Kasischke, "B-52 Bombers Complete BTF Deployment to Diego Garcia", Pacific Air Forces, April 5, 2024, <https://www.pacaf.af.mil/News/Article-Display/Article/3734256/b-52-bombers-complete-btf-deployment-to-diego-garcia/#:~:text=A%20Bomber%20Task%20Force%20deployment%20of%20two%20U.S.%20Air%20Force,Facility%20Diego%20Garcia%2C%20April%202023>. Accessed on October 15, 2024.

15. "Reception Held to Mark 50 Years of Diplomatic Relations Between Mauritius and China", April 15, 2022. Accessed on October 15, 2024.

The clamour for the settling of the Chagos issue has been ongoing since the last century, but it touched the threshold when the rulings of the International Court of Justice,¹⁶ the United Nations General Assembly,¹⁷ and the Tribunal for the Law of the Sea about the illegal occupation fell on the deaf ears of the U.S. and UK. The current Mauritius Prime Minister, Jugnauth has accused the U.S. and the UK of being “hypocrites”¹⁸ and “champions of double talk”¹⁹ and considers it his “sacred duty”²⁰ to regain the sovereignty of Mauritius.

AGREEMENT REACHED: FROM THE PRESENT TO THE FUTURE

Finally, some agreement has been reached amidst the chaos surrounding the parleys on the status of the Chagos archipelago and its earlier residents, the Chagossians, who were evicted due to the depopulation of the island for the military purpose. In October 2024, after the conclusion of the agreement, the joint statement released by the UK and Mauritius confirmed that both “have reached an historic political agreement on the exercise of sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago”.²¹ It further highlights, “For an initial period of 99 years, the United Kingdom will be authorised to exercise, with respect to Diego Garcia, the sovereign rights and authorities of Mauritius required to ensure the continued operation of the base well into the next century”.²² There is no mention that the sovereignty of the Diego Garcia base has been given to Mauritius. Instead, what the agreement has attempted to do in real terms is to transfer the sovereignty of

16. International Court of Justice, “Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965”. Accessed on October 22, 2024.

17. United Nations, “General Assembly Welcomes International Court of Justice Opinion on Chagos Archipelago, Adopts Text Calling for Mauritius’ Complete Decolonization”, Seventy-Third Session, 83rd and 84th meetings, May 22, 2019. Accessed on October 22, 2024.

18. Yasmine Mohabuth, “Mauritius PM Hits out at UK Over Chagos Islands Control”, *South African Herald*, October 20, 2020. Accessed on October 20, 2024.

19. Ibid.

20. “The Sovereignty of Mauritius Over the Chagos: ‘It Is A Sacred Duty’, Says PM”, *Le Matinal*, November 4, 2023. Accessed on October 5, 2024.

21. Foreign, Commonwealth and Development Office (UK Government), “UK and Mauritius Joint Statement, October 3, 2024”, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-between-uk-and-mauritius-3-october-2024>. Accessed on October 21, 2024.

22. Ibid.

the Chagos archipelago to Mauritius which will allow the exiled Chagossians in Mauritius, the UK, and Seychelles to resettle in their land from where they were forced to leave. For this purpose, the UK will create a separate fund for the transformational infrastructure partnership in the outer islands and ultimately aim to enhance the economic, security, and environmental partnership between the UK and Mauritius. However, the zero participation of the Chagossians in the long negotiation process is one of the biggest limitations of the agreement.²³

In literal terms, the sovereignty clause does include Diego Garcia also; however, in reality, the sovereignty of Diego Garcia will continue to be exercised by the UK for the next 99 years on behalf of the U.S. Therefore, the treaty has instead formally made the U.S. acquisition of the territory legal and cleared any misunderstanding. It has strengthened the military foothold of the U.S. in the Indian Ocean at a time when the region's security apparatus is under stress due to the rising military and non-military challenges. The strategic inroads of China in the maritime domain of the Indian Ocean have now become a new normal on one side. On the other, the rising challenges from piracy, and narcotics smuggling, are likely to impact the trade and investment to and from the region. While the challenges have been in the making, and picking up steam in the last decade, a realisation on the part of the US for a consistent and systematic presence was missing.

Additionally, what the two-year-long negotiation points to is the role played by India in helping strike the deal. New Delhi's behind the scene diplomacy has been acknowledged by London, Port Louis, and Washington. Further, it has reiterated faith in India's commitment that a lasting solution resides in diplomacy and negotiation, leading to a win-win situation for all.²⁴ And, lastly, it marks a significant shift in New Delhi's dealings with Washington in the IOR, where

23. Shola Lawal, "Why is the UK Handing the Chagos Islands Back to Mauritius?", Al Jazeera, October 4, 2024, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2024/10/4/why-is-the-uk-handing-the-chagos-islands-back-to-mauritius>. Accessed on October 10, 2024.

24. Radhey Tambi, "India's Stake in the Settlement of the Chagos Dispute", *The Diplomat*, October 11, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/10/indias-stake-in-the-settlement-of-the-chagos-dispute/>. Accessed on October 29, 2024.

it welcomes the U.S.' presence with much more confidence and credibility.²⁵

CONCLUSION

The deal on the Chagos archipelago is a favourable outcome for the Indian Ocean and its community. What the agreement has ultimately done is to remove the smoke that was surrounding the sovereignty clause of the chain of islands in the central Indian Ocean for more than six decades. Further, the timeliness of the agreement points to the legitimacy that Washington wanted for operating its military base, Diego Garcia, amidst the clamour about the sovereignty of the islands and the resettlement issue of the Chagossians. The issue has become pertinent not only for the U.S. but also for India which is feeling the heat and stress of the simmering competition between itself and China in the maritime belly, along with the persistent continental boundary issues. This requires an overhaul in both its internal as well as external balancing, and, hence, playing the role of a negotiator in the Chagos deal to completely decolonise and recognise the claims of both Mauritius and the U.S. is a step in the right direction.

The implications of the deal are not only limited to the four stakeholders (India, U.S., UK, and Mauritius), but it has opened a Pandora's box for other residential countries like France that have sovereignty over contested territories.²⁶ For instance, Mayotte is claimed by Comoros, the island of Tromelin by Mauritius, and the three scattered islands, Glorieuses, Juan de Nova, and Bassas da India, by Madagascar.²⁷ The settlement or status quo can ruffle feathers in the Indian Ocean in the times to come.

While the deal is currently in the agreement stage and the treaty concerning the same is yet to be finalised among the stakeholders, utmost care needs to be taken to ensure that the purpose of the agreement is fulfilled and peace is restored, while maintaining a balance in the Indian Ocean.

25. Ibid.

26. Paco Milhiet, "What the Chagos Islands Deal Means for France's Indian Ocean Territories and Indo-Pacific Strategy", November 6, 2024, <https://thediplomat.com/2024/11/what-the-chagos-islands-deal-means-for-frances-indian-ocean-territories-and-indo-pacific-strategy/>. Accessed on November 9, 2024.

27. Ibid.