



CENTRE FOR AIR POWER STUDIES

In Focus

New Delhi

Neighbourhood Insights Series

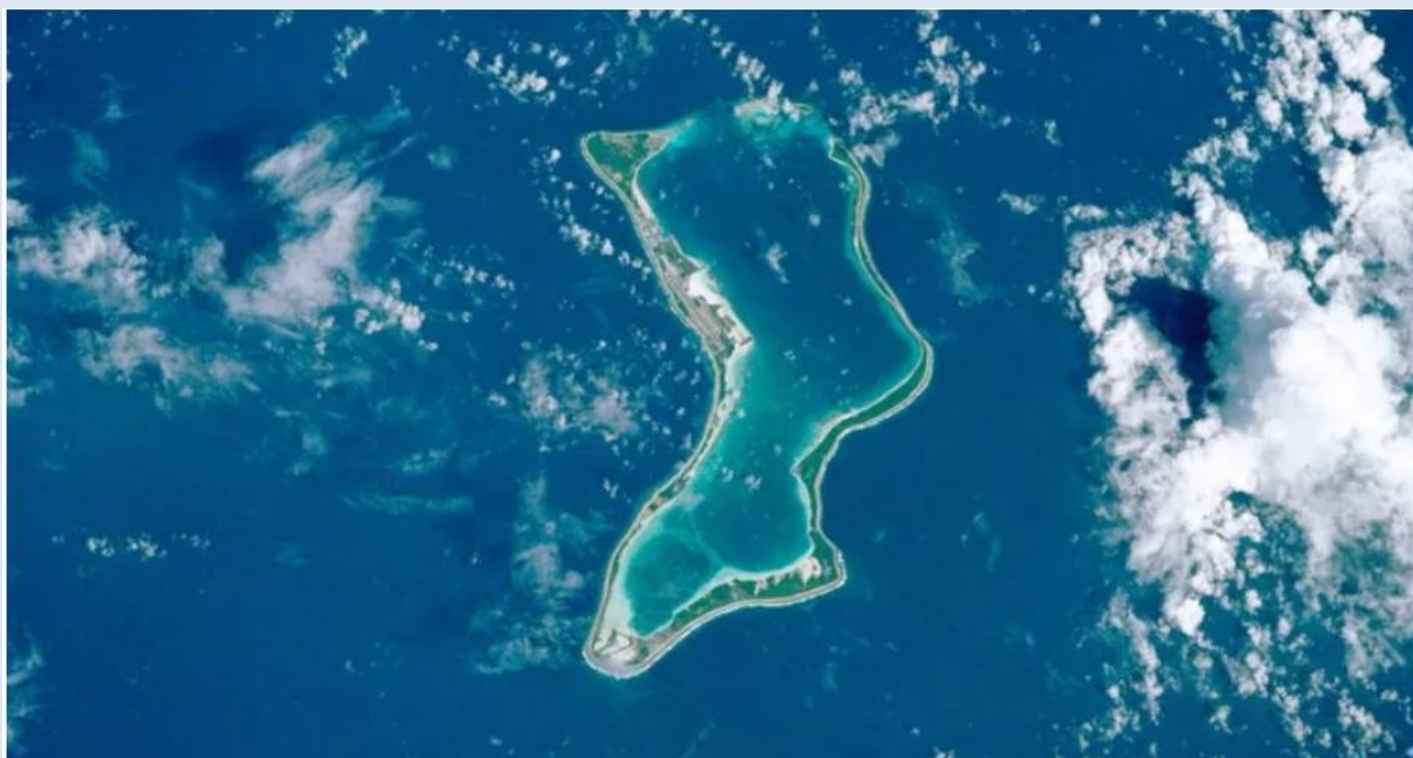
CAPS InFocus: 37/2024

05 August 2024

Quandary in India's Neighbourhood: Mauritius as a Case in Point

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Source: <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-54598084>



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Keywords: Chagos Archipelago, Diego Garcia, India, U.S., China, Indian Ocean

The emerging geopolitical arrangement in the Indian Ocean between India, China, and the US is very complicated. India is a proximate power, and the other two are not only distant powers but also share a complex relationship among themselves. Additionally, both have unique ties with India, where, on the one hand, the US and India are more than willing to cooperate on diverse issues in the Indo-Pacific, while the ties between India and China are at an all-time low despite the economic interdependency.

Recently, Dr Jaishankar undertook the first bilateral state visit¹ to the Republic of Mauritius in the Southwest Indian Ocean under Modi 3.0. There, he reiterated India's support for Mauritius' complete independence² as it claims the Chagos archipelago, which currently houses the US naval base in the Central Indian Ocean (CIO). This reaffirms India's commitment to decolonisation and the principle of strategic autonomy. Concomitantly, for Washington, Diego Garcia's role as a military base is vital as it revisits the Indian Ocean under the wider Indo-Pacific strategy to deal with the rise of China. On the other hand, like New Delhi, Beijing also supports the claims of complete decolonisation of Chagos. The article will unpack how the major powers look at the issue of independence of Chagos, and where the meeting of minds will take place.

Historical Overview of the Chagos Archipelago

By bringing down the curtain on its engagements in the Indian Ocean with the 'East of Suez' policy, Britain brought a sigh of relief for many, but not for everyone, with incomplete decolonisation for Mauritius. Constituted in 1965, the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)³ comprised 58 islands, including the Chagos archipelago (belonging to Mauritius) and the islands of Aldabra, Desroches, and Farquhar (all three belonging to Seychelles). With the independence of Seychelles in 1976, the islands under its jurisdiction were returned. However, Chagos, due to its geographical location and strategic vitality, became a trophy that was passed from the United Kingdom to the US with some exchange of notes in the 1970s.

As the Cold War was unravelling between the U.S. and the then USSR, Washington sought ways and means to counter the increasing Soviet commitments and interests⁴ in the Indian Ocean, especially after considering the vacuum that would be left with Britain's withdrawal. This factor was further bolstered by India's victory over Pakistan in 1971, where the ideological support given by Moscow to New Delhi was closely observed by Washington. Countering Soviet economic, political, ideological, and ultimately military support was the primary objective, which persuaded the US to

establish its continuous and semi-extended presence in this part of the world. Diego Garcia, the largest island of the Chagos Archipelago, emerged as the ideal location and was developed consequently by depopulating⁵ the population involved in the copra plantation. Though, initially developed as a communication base in 1973, it was later expanded into a logistics facility to deter and counter Soviet presence and project power both during war and peacetime.

However, in the recent past, the Chagossians, along with the Mauritian government, have been claiming the return of their territory, which is entangled between the sovereign rights of Mauritius, the rising military interests of the US in the Indian Ocean, and the colonial past of the UK. Despite the assertion by Mauritius and rulings by the International Court of Justice⁶, the United Nations,⁷ and the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea⁸ about the incomplete decolonisation by the former colonial power, the UK, London is unwilling to give away the claims soon. Instead, in a statement in 2019, Sir Alan Duncan, Minister of State for Europe and Americas, remarked that “we do not doubt our sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago, which has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814”. Thus, bringing into question who is not following the rules-based order.⁹

The Present is More Complicated than the Past

Unlike the Cold War, where the primary task of the US presence in the Indian Ocean was to counter the intrusions of the then USSR, India's interest was to ensure that the Indian Ocean remained peaceful and outside the influence of the great power rivalry of the Cold War, while it was busy dealing with challenges across continental frontiers. The interests of both New Delhi and Washington have evolved over time and now seems to be converging in dealing with the common threat posed by a belligerent China in the Indian Ocean.¹⁰ Both have signed the four foundational agreements to enhance the sharing of information and intelligence, along with access to logistics facilities.¹¹ Additionally, as India is on a defence modernisation drive, U.S.' P8I Poseidon has strengthened New Delhi's surveillance and reconnaissance ability in the Indian Ocean. Recently, a bipartisan US-China Economic and Security Review Commission has proposed a bill, the Indian Ocean Region Strategic Review Act, 2024,¹² which will not only strengthen the 'Indo' pillar of Washington's Indo-Pacific policy but also show its commitment to India's security needs which are maximum in the Indian Ocean. The relationship is not only advancing on bilateral issues but also witnessing a positive trajectory in other formats like trilateral mechanisms, quadrilateral (through QUAD), and multilateral forums.

However, India, being an ardent supporter of anti-colonialism, once again reiterated its support to Mauritius over the incomplete decolonisation of the Chagos archipelago during the recent visit. In contrast, the US recognises the UK's sovereignty over the BIOT.¹³ Additionally, the US questions the consent of the elected representatives of Mauritius over the BIOT, and contends that present-day Mauritians do not represent the views of the Chagossians, who are spread in different countries like Seychelles, the UK, Mauritius, etc.¹⁴ Interestingly, both Beijing and New Delhi are on the same page regarding the issue of complete decolonisation of the Chagos Archipelago. China has gone a step ahead by putting Taiwan and Chagos on the same agenda in its fight for territorial integrity.¹⁵ How will the US be able to manage this dilemma of advocating for a rule-based order in the Indo-Pacific region while simultaneously supporting UK's claim on the BIOT, strengthening its relations with India, and developing mechanisms to counter China, all of which put the role of Diego Garcia at the centre of any discussion?

It remains to be seen how each of the great powers—New Delhi, Washington, and Beijing—taking a stance based on their interest, will lead to either contradictions or meetings of minds in the Indian Ocean Region.

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⁴ Hanson W. Baldwin, "The Indian Ocean Contest: II", *The New York Times*, March 21, 1972, <https://www.nytimes.com/1972/03/21/archives/staking-their-claims.html>. Accessed on July 21, 2024.

⁵ n. 3.

⁶ International Court of Justice, "Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965", [Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965 \(icj-cij.org\)](https://www.icj-cij.org). Accessed on July 21, 2024.

⁷ United Nations, "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, [General Assembly Welcomes International Court of Justice Opinion on Chagos Archipelago, Adopts Text Calling for Mauritius' Complete Decolonization | Meetings Coverage and Press Releases \(un.org\)](https://www.un.org/press/en/2019/ga7312146.docstxt.html). Accessed on July 21, 2024.

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¹⁰ Monish Tourangbam, “The India-US-China Triangle in South Asia: Competition Drives Adaptation”, Institute of South Asian Studies, November 14, 2023, [The India-US-China Triangle in South Asia: Competition Drives Adaptation – NUS Institute of South Asian Studies \(ISAS\)](#). Accessed on July 23, 2024.

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