



The Indo-Pacific Geopolitical OBSERVATORY

DIEGO GARCIA IN INDIA'S SECURITY CALCULUS: THE SEARCH FOR A REALIST SOLUTION

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AUTHOR'S PRESENTATION



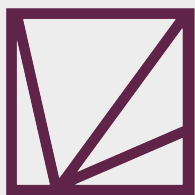
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Captain Sarabjeet S Parmar is a retired Indian Naval Officer whose main areas of research include national and maritime strategy and security related aspects in the Indo-Pacific, piracy, HADR, and international maritime law with a focus on lawfare. He has written and spoken extensively at various national and international conferences in these areas. He has been a Research Fellow at the Manohar Parrikar Institute for Defence Studies and Analyses and worked in the Indian Navy's strategic apex level offices where, as Director Strategy was part of the core team that published the Indian Navy's 2015 unclassified maritime security strategy document titled Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy, carried out regional maritime assessments and completed the doctrine development plan. He was the Executive Director and Senior Fellow at the National Maritime Foundation prior retirement and presently is a Distinguished Fellow with the Council for Strategic and Defence Research, New Delhi and the United Services Institute of India.

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This observatory is directed by **Marianne Péron-Doise**, Associate Research Fellow at IRIS, and is part of the Asia-Pacific Programme.



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FOREWORD

In collaboration with the Indian foreign policy journal *India's World*, we extend our warm thanks to the editorial director, Jacob Happymon, for this amicable partnership. We are republishing an article by Captain (Retd) Sarabjeet S. Parmar, titled "Diego Garcia in India's Security Calculus: The Search for a Realist Solution", originally featured in the special issue *Delhi's Grand Strategy*, Volume 1, January–February 2025.

Captain Parmar, well-known to IRIS Geopolitical Observatory of the Indo-Pacific, discusses in this article the sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago, which London retained and designated as the British Indian Ocean Territory following Mauritius' independence in 1965. Specifically, the author raises the issue of the military enclave of Diego Garcia and the presence of U.S. armed forces in the heart of the Western Indian Ocean. It is worth recalling that in the 1970s, at the request of the U.S. government, which sought to establish a military base there, London expelled the indigenous inhabitants of the Chagos Archipelago in exchange for compensation to Mauritius.

Following a prolonged legal battle, in which the United Nations General Assembly played a decisive role, the United Kingdom (UK) recognised Mauritian sovereignty over the Chagos on 3 August 2024. However, London retained rights over Diego Garcia to continue operating the joint military base with the United States (U.S.) for a period of 99 years, a decision contested by the new Mauritian government. Should the UK lose its status as a resident power in the Indian Ocean, the potential withdrawal of British and American forces could significantly alter the strategic balance of the entire region, potentially encouraging China to expand its port ambitions and adopt a more assertive naval stance.

While the author approaches the issue from an Indian strategic perspective, it seemed pertinent to share his reflections as they highlight an important consideration for France—a country bordering the Indian Ocean and a close partner of both India and the United States. France must begin adapting its resources and collaborations in the Indo-Pacific region, especially since the "Pacific" aspect of this strategy is already strained by the New Caledonia crisis. Whatever the outcome of the ongoing discussions about Diego Garcia, the situation may evolve over time, influenced by the Mauritian government's foreign policy calculations. Though the stakes differ, France also faces recurring claims from Madagascar regarding the Éparses Islands in the Mozambique Channel.

France has major sovereignty interests in the Indian Ocean, where its military forces, including its navy, have long been committed to both global security (securing sea lines of

communication, protecting merchant traffic, combating piracy) and regional security (protecting the Blue Economy of the Indian Ocean Commission [IOC] member states and the East African coast). Operating from its bases in Djibouti, Abu Dhabi, and its overseas territories of Réunion and Mayotte, France—like India—has taken full measure of China’s multifaceted presence (diplomatic, economic, military, informational) throughout the Indian Ocean, including its proximity to French territories in the southern zone. This is not to overlook Russia's destabilising activities in Mozambique. France is responding alongside partners, including the European Union (EU), by bolstering the institutional expertise and capacity of regional organisations such as the IOC and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) with the support of its diplomatic, economic, and cultural networks.

France is also actively engaged in the defence of global commons through Blue Diplomacy initiatives supporting oceans and climate and biodiversity projects via the French Development Agency (AFD). These diverse tools and levers deserve greater emphasis and alignment with new partners. For instance, innovative cooperation has led to the creation of a regional security training school in Sri Lanka. However, we must remain mindful of the fragility of our regional position and the multiple vulnerabilities of our territories, as tragically underscored by the impact of Cyclone Chido on Mayotte.

Marianne Péron-Doise, Associate Research Fellow at IRIS
and director of the IRIS Geopolitical Observatory of the Indo-Pacific

INTRODUCTION

The sovereignty dispute¹ over the Chagos Archipelago, and Diego Garcia in particular, has reached a new level which requires India to reassess its approach.

The changing security dynamics of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) and the involvement of three friendly nations (Mauritius, UK, and the U.S.) in the dispute requires a more realist stance from India as its national interests could be impacted in time.

Diego Garcia, a 24 kilometers long island with an area of 30 square kilometers, is a small territory in the centre of the IOR, and yet has played a major role in power plays since the Cold War. The island hosts a U.S. base and is a part of the Chagos Archipelago, a British Indian

¹ “The change in sovereignty for the Chagos Archipelago”, *IJSS* 30, Comment: 26 (November 2024), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/strategic-comments/2024/10/the-change-in-sovereignty-for-the-chagos-archipelago/>

Ocean Territory (BIOT), from which the United Kingdom draws its claim as an Indian Ocean (IO) nation.

Two issues emerge from the dispute that India has contended with over time. First is the retention of the Chagos Archipelago as a part of the United Kingdom while granting independence to Mauritius in 1968 and the expulsion of the local population, the Chagossians, in 1971.

The other is the U.S. base in Diego Garcia which was part of a UK-U.S. deal in 1966 to establish defence installations and staging posts² in the BIOT comprising the islands of Aldabra, Farquhar, Desroches and the Chagos Archipelago³. The three islands of Aldabra, Farquhar, and Desroches were subsequently returned⁴ to Seychelles when it gained independence in 1976.

India's Cold War era stances in support of Mauritius and against the U.S. base was based on its historic relations with Mauritius, its championing the cause of decolonization, and its aversion to the presence of foreign military powers in the IO. There was also a parallel path wherein India benefited from the presence of the U.S., despite the support for Mauritian sovereignty over Chagos. This approach not only enhanced India's position in the IOR but also strengthened strategic relations with the U.S. while retaining good ties with Mauritius. This article looks at past strategy and possible scenarios that India would need to consider in pursuit of its interests in the IOR.

COLD WAR DYNAMICS

This analysis is based on official policy discourse and declassified documents available at Abhilekh Patal⁵.

Apart from historic ties, India's support for Mauritius was informed by its approach to decolonisation, political self-determination, and support of sovereignty and territorial integrity of nations since the 1955 Bandung Conference. This strategy eventually helped India to emerge as a major player in the IOR.

² Rahul Jaybhay, "India's historic shift in attitude about a US base at Diego Garcia", *The Interpreter*, 29 October 2024, <https://www.lowyinstitute.org/the-interpreter/india-s-historic-shift-attitude-about-us-base-diego-garcia>

³ "Mauritius country profile", *BBC*, 9 October 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-13882233#:~:text=In%201965%2C%20shortly%20before%20Mauritian,in%201976%20on%20its%20independence.>

⁴ Idem

⁵ "U.S. Naval Base In Diego Garsia- Paper re.", *Abhilekh-Patal*, n.d., https://www.abhilekh-patal.in/jspui/handle/123456789/2753734?searchWord=diego&backquery=%5blocation=123456789/1&query=diego+garci a&sort_by=dc.date.accessioned_dt&order=desc&rpp=20&filter_field_1=fileType&filter_type_1>equals&filter_value_1=PDF&etal=0&originalquery=&filtername=department&filtertype>equals&filterquery=External+Affairs%3A%3AAMS%5d

The simultaneous approach of accepting U.S. presence in the IOR offered several benefits to India. While the UK agreed not to position nuclear facilities on the island, Delhi saw the U.S. presence in the IOR as a security blanket against China. Hence, when the U.S., in 1963, included the IO in the operational area of the 7th Fleet, India signed an MoU that permitted U.S. warships to visit Indian ports every six months. This step was taken despite opposition from the erstwhile U.S.SR and other IOR littorals regarding the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in the region. Subsequently, India considered the presence of U.S. nuclear weapons in the IOR an effective deterrent after China went nuclear in 1964.

Hence, India's approach to Diego Garcia was cautious and featured a multipronged approach by being:

- A friend of Mauritius.
- A champion of decolonisation.
- Maintaining relations with the erstwhile U.S.SR which are continuing with contemporary Russia.
- Supporting U.S. presence in the IOR.
- Restricting Chinese influence in the IOR.

CONTEMPORARY DILEMMAS

Over the last three decades the situation in the IOR has changed considerably as has the Chagos Archipelago Mauritius-UK imbroglio. The UK and Mauritius announced on October 3, 2024 that an agreement⁶ regarding the sovereignty of the Chagos Archipelago had been reached.

The agreement addressed several aspects of which three main issues are:

- Recognition of Mauritian sovereignty over the archipelago including the island of Diego Garcia.
- Continued operation of Diego Garcia by the UK as a military base for an initial period of 99 years, which can be extended.
- Provision of a financial support package to Mauritius, including annual payments and infrastructure investment.

The agreement, considered a historic deal by both nations, is now facing a twist in the tale with Navin Ramgoolam, the recently elected Mauritian Prime Minister, asking for a review of

⁶ United Kingdom's government, "UK and Mauritius joint statement", 3 October 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/joint-statement-between-uk-and-mauritius-3-october-2024>

the agreement. The current Mauritius government considers the deal a sell out and has also criticised the 99-year period of continued operations.

One of the issues recently raised by the new government is the amount of money⁷ involved, though no figure has been mentioned by either side. Mauritius has forwarded new terms which British Conservatives consider to be disadvantageous to the UK. On December 20, 2024, a UK-Mauritius joint statement⁸ indicated that discussions were in progress towards formulating a treaty that will ensure long-term, secure and effective operations of the existing base on Diego Garcia and Mauritian sovereignty over the Archipelago.

Money remains a thorny issue which Mauritius needs for its economy but both nations would like to resolve differences before the Trump administration takes over. Marco Rubio, the incoming U.S. Secretary of State, sees Mauritius as aligned with China and termed the agreement as a “serious threat”⁹ to U.S. national security. Nigel Farage, a Reform UK leader and friend of Trump, said the agreement would “put the UK at odds with an important ally.”¹⁰

Three scenarios could emerge from the existing imbroglio which India would have to contend with:

- Signing of the agreement or resultant treaty and Mauritius and the UK working together to achieve societal, economic, security and environmental dividends while operations from Diego Garcia continue as hitherto.
- Status quo while Mauritius and the UK renegotiate the agreement, under the U.S. lens.
- Exit of the UK and Mauritius leasing Diego Garcia to the U.S. as a base.

India would have to follow a well-considered approach, continuing its engagement policies and balancing relations especially between the U.S. and Russia. Russia and the U.S. have an India-centric approach to the IOR, with the U.S.¹¹ looking at enhancing India’s ability to deter Chinese aggression, and Russia¹² looking at increasing interaction with India in the region.

⁷ Yasine Mohabuth, “Mauritius hints Chagos talks stuck over money”, BBC, 23 December 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cj49qjyppqv4o>

⁸ United Kingdom’s government, “UK-Mauritius joint statement on the Chagos Archipelago, 20 December 2024, <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/uk-mauritius-joint-statement-on-the-chagos-archipelago-20-december-2024>

⁹ “Mauritius PM seeks independent review of Chagos Islands agreement with UK”, *The Indian Express*, November 29 2024, <https://indianexpress.com/article/news-today/mauritius-pm-review-chagos-islands-agreement-uk-9697628/>

¹⁰ “Trump team hostile to Chagos deal, claims Farage”, BBC, 13 November 2024, <https://www.bbc.com/news/articles/cgqyzzg7pzvo>

¹¹ U.S. Department of Defense, “2022 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America”, 27 October 2022, <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Oct/27/2003103845/-1/-1/1/2022-NATIONAL-DEFENSE-STRATEGY-NPR-MDR.pdf>

¹² Russia Maritime Studies Institute, “Maritime doctrine of the Russian Federation”, 31 July 2022, https://dnnlgwick.blob.core.windows.net/portals/0/NWCDepartments/Russia%20Maritime%20Studies%20Institute/20220731_ENG_RUS_Maritime_Doctrine_FINALtxt.pdf?sv=2017-04-17&sr=b&si=DNNFileManagerPolicy&sig=2zUFSaTUSPcOpQDBk%2FuCtVnb%2FDoy06Cbh0EI5tGpl2Y%3D

India, meanwhile, has extensive ties¹³ with Mauritius across the spheres of economics and security. Any adverse impact on India's Neighbourhood First Policy and its position in the IOR as a Preferred Security Partner and First Responder would have to be avoided.

UK'S RELEVANCE AND DELHI'S RESPONSE

The exit of the UK, although unlikely at this stage, could lead to the erasure of BIOT and raise questions about the status of UK as an IOR nation and its presence in regional organisations like Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA)¹⁴ and the Indian Ocean Naval Symposium (IONS)¹⁵. Exit from the IOR would end UK's support in addressing common regional interests and is thus not in India's best interest. For the U.S. the exit of the British could mean having a new "landlord", heightened revenue for Mauritius, signing of a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) between the U.S. and Mauritius ushering in a new era of Mauritius-U.S. relations, leading to the dilution of Chinese influence in Mauritius.

The second scenario could lead to a diluted form of the third, while the first needs to be signed before January 20, 2025, failing which the situation would default to the status quo.

While Indian military assets have never visited Diego Garcia, the increased presence of Chinese ships, especially research vessels may dictate such a need. Any void created by the absence or withdrawal of a significant military power will be filled by China thereby adding to threats, risks and challenges (TRCs). These TRCs require India to be more visible and present in the region. While the maritime areas of the Northern IOR, specifically the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal are being addressed gaps still exist, and the Southern IOR needs more attention.

The southern IOR has seen rerouting of shipping via the Cape of Good Hope, following the Red Sea situation. This rerouting will be accompanied by attendant non-traditional TRCs that will require India's presence in the area.

The use of Diego Garcia under a Mauritius-U.S. or the UK 99-year agreement would enhance India's presence. The long list of agreements signed with the U.S., especially the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)¹⁶, and to some extent the recently signed

¹³ High Commission of India in Port Louis, "India Mauritius Bilateral Brief", February 2024, <https://hcimauritius.gov.in/pages?id=9avme&subid=yb8md&nextid=RdG7d>

¹⁴ Indian Ocean Rim Association website : <https://www.iora.int/indian-ocean-rim-association>

¹⁵ Indian Ocean Naval Symposium website : <https://www.ions.global/ions-working-groups>

¹⁶ Ministry of Defense of India, "India and the United States Sign the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement (LEMOA)", 30 August 2016, <https://archive.pib.gov.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=149322>

non-binding Security of Supply Arrangement (SOSA)¹⁷ could support visits to Diego Garcia during deployments of Indian maritime and air assets in the Southern IOR.

India may find it difficult to balance its approach between Mauritius, UK and the U.S.. At best, it can balance two nations while protecting its national interests. Given the three scenarios it faces, India would have to calibrate its support to Mauritius while maintaining a preference for continued U.S. presence at Diego Garcia and consider using the island to enhance its presence in the IOR, especially the southern part.

¹⁷ U.S Embassy & Consulates in India, “DOD, India Ministry of Defence Enter Into Security of Supply Arrangement”, 23 August 2024, <https://in.usembassy.gov/dod-india-ministry-of-defence-enter-into-security-of-supply-arrangement/>

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