



By: Harvey Morris

Trump's veto of UK's Chagos Islands deal underlines security dilemmas of Indian Ocean states



UK and Mauritian officials will meet next week to discuss the future of their deal on transferring sovereignty of the Chagos Islands after it was effectively blocked by **Donald Trump**.

Senior UK minister Wes Streeting, outlining the government's position at the weekend, denied that an agreement to hand over the Indian Ocean archipelago to Mauritius was dead.

He nevertheless acknowledged there had been a shift in position in Washington towards opposing the deal.

The government's decision to shelve legislation to ratify a treaty agreed almost a year ago has focused fresh attention on the current frosty relations between the UK and US allies, who jointly operate a military base on the island of **Diego Garcia**.

Foreign office minister Stephen Doughty told parliament this week that US opposition to the Chagos handover made it impossible to update a 1966 UK-US agreement on the military use of what will continue to be known, at least for now, as the British Indian Ocean Territory.

The British position continues to be that the sovereignty deal with Mauritius, which includes a 99-year lease on the Diego Garcia base, is the best way of securing the long-term interests of the UK and US.

Beyond the London-Washington spat

The implications of the deadlock go beyond the latest London-Washington spat, which is being closely watched by other states across the increasingly militarised Indian Ocean region and beyond.

They include the participants at the weekend Indian Ocean Conference that meets annually to discuss regional cooperation and security.

Mauritian foreign minister Dhananjay Ramful

used this year's gathering in his home capital of Port Louis to assert that **Mauritius** would pursue every diplomatic or legal avenue to complete the decolonisation process despite the latest setback.

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The annual gathering is the brainchild of India, which claims the role of 'net security provider' in the Indian Ocean region to reflect its role in maritime security and relief operations.

Delhi has consistently supported Mauritius's sovereignty claim and regards the island state as key to its security strategy as China extends its presence across an ocean that handles half of the world's container traffic and two-thirds of its oil shipments.

India's position is that a US security presence, centred on the Diego Garcia base, serves as a check on any Chinese ambitions to dominate the region.

The shifting geopolitics

A further challenge for India is that another of its regional neighbours, the **Republic of Maldives**, has used the freezing of the UK-Mauritius deal to reassert its own claim to the Chagos Islands.

The small island state, midway between India and Diego Garcia, welcomed the pause and said it was an opportunity to renew negotiations over the future of the Chagos. The Maldives is just one state where Beijing has been using trade deals and financial support to extend its regional influence.

The shifting geopolitics affecting the Indian Ocean has persuaded states as far away as Japan to enhance their defence cooperation with India

China's investment in a so-called 'string of pearls' across the Indian Ocean through such bilateral deals with maritime states has heightened concerns about its future intentions.

Beijing's presence extends to Pakistan, where the Chinese operate the port of Gwadar, part of the China-Pakistan Economic Corridor. The commercial project is viewed as part of Pakistan's efforts to balance Indian influence in the wider region.

The shifting geopolitics affecting the Indian Ocean has, meanwhile, persuaded states as far away as Japan to enhance their defence cooperation with India, given the latter's growing status as a regional security provider.

A world of shifting alliances

At the centre of this changing seascape, the status of the Chagos Islands and Diego Garcia is for the time being frozen. The Iran war revealed that, even under UK sovereignty, the US does not have carte blanche to operate out of the joint base.

Prime minister **Keir Starmer**'s refusal to allow the US to use Diego Garcia and other UK bases for its initial strikes on Iran prompted the Trumpian taunt that "This is not Winston Churchill that we're dealing with".



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Even that limited cooperation prompted Iran to launch two missile strikes towards Diego Garcia which failed to reach their target, according to the UK government.

The Iran war has, meanwhile, exposed the fragility of international norms intended to protect freedom of navigation in the Indian Ocean as much as in the **Strait of Hormuz**.

US intransigence over a Chagos deal that Washington previously supported may put a resolution on hold until there is a new president in the White House, although even that would provide no guarantee of solving the UK's dilemma.

In the meantime, the stalemate will add a further factor of uncertainty in an Indian Ocean region where small states and larger powers are adjusting their security strategies to a world of shifting alliances and looming threats.