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Chagos Archipelago — UK Suspends Sovereignty Deal with Mauritius: Diego Garcia and Indo-Pacific Stakes

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Chagos Archipelago — UK Suspends Sovereignty Deal with Mauritius: Diego Garcia and Indo-Pacific Stakes

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WHY IN NEWS

The United Kingdom has suspended the previously negotiated deal to transfer sovereignty of the **Chagos Archipelago** (British Indian Ocean Territory — BIOT) to **Mauritius**, following strong opposition from the **United States** under the Trump administration. The deal's collapse has significant implications for Indo-Pacific geopolitics, Indian Ocean security, and the rights of the displaced Chagossian people.

The Chagos Archipelago is one of the last unresolved chapters of British colonial territorial arrangements in the Indian Ocean. It sits at the intersection of colonial history, international law (the ICJ's 2019 advisory opinion), great power competition (the US military presence at Diego Garcia), and the rights of a displaced indigenous community.

WHAT IS THE CHAGOS ARCHIPELAGO?

FEATURE	DETAIL
Location	Central Indian Ocean (~1,600 km south of India's tip)
Official designation	British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT)
Total islands	~58 small islands across 7 atolls
Most strategically significant island	Diego Garcia
Diego Garcia	Hosts a major US-UK joint military base — critical for Indian Ocean, Persian Gulf, and Asia-Pacific operations

DIEGO GARCIA — STRATEGIC SIGNIFICANCE

Diego Garcia is one of the most strategically positioned military bases in the world:

- **US Navy Support Facility (NSF) Diego Garcia** — home to B-52 strategic bombers, P-8 maritime patrol aircraft, and pre-positioned military equipment
- Used as a launch pad for operations in the Gulf War (1990–91), Operation Enduring Freedom (Afghanistan, 2001), and Iraq War (2003)
- Enables power projection across the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), Arabian Sea, and Bay of Bengal
- Its location is **equidistant** from the Persian Gulf and the Malacca Strait — two of the world’s most critical maritime chokepoints

COLONIAL HISTORY

Displacement of the Chagossians

When the UK excised the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in **1965** (three years before Mauritius’s independence in 1968) to create BIOT, the approximately **2,000 Chagossian people** who had lived there for generations were forcibly displaced to Mauritius and the Seychelles between 1968 and 1973.

This deportation — carried out to clear the islands for the US military base — was later found by UK courts to have been unlawful. The Chagossians have fought for decades for the right to return.

TIMELINE	EVENT
1965	UK detaches Chagos from Mauritius before independence
1968	Mauritius gains independence (without Chagos)
1968–73	Chagossian community forcibly removed
2000	UK High Court: removal of Chagossians was unlawful
2004	UK government issued Orders in Council blocking return
2008	House of Lords upheld Orders in Council (government appeal)
2019	ICJ advisory opinion: UK must return Chagos to Mauritius
2024	UK-Mauritius deal agreed under previous UK government
2026	UK suspends deal under US pressure

THE ICJ ADVISORY OPINION (2019)

The International Court of Justice, in its **February 25, 2019 advisory opinion**, concluded that:

- 1 The decolonisation of Mauritius was not **lawfully completed** when Mauritius became independent in 1968 without the Chagos Islands

- 2 The UK's continued administration of BIOT constitutes a **wrongful act** under international law
- 3 The UK has an obligation to **end its administration** of Chagos as rapidly as possible

The UN General Assembly subsequently adopted a resolution (116 votes in favour) calling on the UK to withdraw from Chagos within six months. The UK and US voted against the resolution.

THE DEAL — AND ITS SUSPENSION

What Was Agreed (2024)

The UK government under Prime Minister Rishi Sunak (and later confirmed under Keir Starmer's government) reached a framework agreement with Mauritius:

- Mauritius would receive **sovereignty** over the Chagos Archipelago
- The UK (and US) would retain a **99-year lease** on Diego Garcia for the military base
- UK would pay Mauritius significant financial compensation

Why the US Objected

The Trump administration's stated concerns centred on:

- Sovereignty transfer to a small nation potentially susceptible to Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean
- Concerns about the long-term security of Diego Garcia under a 99-year lease rather than indefinite British territorial control

Current Status

The UK has suspended the deal pending renegotiation. The Mauritian government has protested, noting the ICJ opinion supports its claim.

INDIA'S STAKES

DIMENSION	DETAIL
Indian Ocean geography	Chagos is ~1,600 km south of India's southern tip — within India's strategic neighbourhood
Indo-Pacific security	Diego Garcia is a key node in US Indo-Pacific operations — India-US defence partnership (COMCASA, BECA) affects access dynamics
Chinese angle	If Mauritius (or a future government) granted China access post-sovereignty transfer, it would create a strategic security concern for India
Chagossian precedent	India's own tribal displacement debates find parallel in Chagossian forced removal

UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS2 — International Relations	Decolonisation, ICJ advisory opinions, Indo-Pacific geopolitics
GS2 — IR	US-UK special relationship; India's extended neighbourhood
GS3 — Security	Indian Ocean Region (IOR); maritime chokepoints; Diego Garcia
Mains Keywords	BIOT, ICJ advisory opinion, decolonisation, IOR, Diego Garcia, Indo-Pacific, Chagossian people

*British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) | Diego Garcia: US-UK joint military base | Chagossians: ~2,000 displaced 1968–73 | **ICJ opinion (Feb 25, 2019): decolonisation of Mauritius incomplete; UK must end administration | UK-Mauritius deal (2024): sovereignty to Mauritius + 99-year Diego Garcia lease | Deal suspended: 2026 — US pressure under Trump administration | UN UNGA vote (2019): 116 countries supported Mauritius | Location: Indian Ocean, ~1,600 km south of India | Mauritius independence: 1968 | GS2: International Relations, Security & Defence***

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