

DECOLONISING THE CHAGOS ARCHIPELAGO

Relevant for: International Relations | Topic: India - Indian Ocean Island nations

The United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) voted last month by a huge majority (116 out of 193 members) to demand that the U.K. “withdraw its colonial administration” within six months over the Chagos archipelago in the Indian Ocean in favour of Mauritius. The archipelago is better known for hosting the U.S. military base at Diego Garcia. The non-binding vote was a rebuke to the U.K.

For several decades the Chagos archipelago has been the cause of a dispute between Mauritius and the U.K., over the decision in 1965 to separate Diego Garcia from the rest of the archipelago for setting up the military base, in collaboration with the U.S. Mauritius, a British colony, achieved independence in 1968 but the U.K. refused to return the Chagos archipelago, claiming sovereignty over the islands. The U.K. depopulated Diego Garcia by expelling all its inhabitants, to facilitate the building of the military base, paying just £4 million as compensation to Mauritius. In contravention of international human rights laws, from 1967 to 1973, the U.K. forcibly moved around 1,500 Chagossians to Mauritius and Seychelles, and prevented them from returning to their homes. The dispute festered over the decades, with Mauritius, as per its Constitution, rightly claimed sovereignty over Chagos and challenged the U.K.’s stand.

In February this year, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) had ruled that the U.K. had “illegally” detached Diego Garcia from the archipelago and split the islands. The ruling, also non-binding, observed that the decolonisation of Chagos was incomplete and the U.K. had the obligation to complete the decolonisation process. The court rejected the U.K.’s argument that the ICJ lacked jurisdiction and the matter was a bilateral issue.

The U.K. had invented a new category called the British Indian Ocean Territory and argued at the ICJ that it had sovereignty over the Chagos. The U.K. also stated, in support of its position, that the military base at Diego Garcia was essential to provide maritime security against terrorists, organised crime and piracy. The U.K. did not act on the ICJ ruling, compelling Mauritius to take the case to the UN, which has now accepted its sovereignty over the whole archipelago. The ruling highlights the isolation of the U.K. and the U.S. on this issue.

The U.K.’s decision to depopulate Diego Garcia was an egregious example of human rights violations. The U.S. and the U.K. have often wagged their fingers at developing countries on human rights violations and now find themselves in the dock for the same at the UN.

Mauritius is naturally elated and Prime Minister Pravind Jugnauth has welcomed the UNGA resolution. The African Union, which has backed Mauritius to the hilt, has stated that it was unthinkable that in the 21st century parts of Africa are still under colonial administration.

India has played an important role, away from the public glare, in this whole affair. India’s relations with Mauritius are unique and it was a foregone conclusion that India would solidly back Mauritius’s claims, given India’s active role in decolonisation. The U.S. and the U.K. tried to influence India to restrain Mauritius. Both countries conveyed to Mauritius they could not hand over the Chagos as long as it is required for defence purposes. The realistic view is that nothing will change but some accommodation or agreement can be worked out. India is likely to play a not too insignificant role in working out a modus vivendi.

Though India was a strident critic of military bases in the Indian Ocean during the Cold War, geo-strategic changes in the last three decades have thrown up new challenges, with China

making inroads into the Indian Ocean and occupying islands illegally in the South China Sea. The increasing footprint of China in the maritime domain has led to countervailing measures in the formation of the Quad, a loose formation of Australia, Japan, India and the U.S., and the renaming of the U.S.'s Pacific Command as the Indo-Pacific Command.

India-U.S. defence ties have also progressed significantly with the signing of the Logistics Exchange Memorandum of Agreement, which provides mutual access to the armed forces of the two countries to selected military facilities. The other significant bilateral agreement is the Communications Compatibility and Security Agreement, which facilitates encrypted communication between the two militaries. These developments have a bearing on Diego Garcia and India's more nuanced view on this military base.

Eventually, the issue of sovereignty will have to be finessed by agreements that allow continuation of the military base at Diego Garcia with guarantees that Mauritius will retain sovereignty over the Chagos archipelago. Mauritius will agree to lease out the island for a long period to the U.S. for maintaining the military base. The U.K.'s role is more problematic in the aftermath of the ICJ ruling and the UN resolution. It would be best for London to step back and hand over sovereignty to Mauritius and simultaneously work out the leasing arrangement with the U.S. India can play a pivotal role in bringing such an agreement to fruition.

Pinak Ranjan Chakravarty is a former Ambassador and Secretary in the Ministry of External Affairs; he is a Visiting Fellow at the Delhi-based Observer Research Foundation. The views expressed are personal

Please enter a valid email address.

It opens the window for India to take advantage of economic opportunities in the geopolitical space

Join our online subscriber community

Experience an advertisement-free site with article recommendations tailored for you

Already a user? [Sign In](#)

To know more about Ad free news reading experience and subscription [Click Here](#)

or Please whitelist our website on your Adblocker

END

Downloaded from **crackIAS.com**

© **Zuccess App** by crackIAS.com