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# Why Chagos Islands matter, why UK keeps Diego Garcia base

British Foreign Minister David Lammy said the deal settled the contested sovereignty of Britain's last overseas territory. The deal settles the long-term future of the Diego Garcia military base, which is shared by the UK and the US.

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Written by [Rishika Singh](#)

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An undated file photo shows Diego Garcia, the largest island in the Chagos archipelago and site of a major United States military base in the middle of the Indian Ocean leased from Britain in 1966 (Reuters/File Photo)

The UK on Thursday said it would cede sovereignty of the strategically important Chagos Islands to Mauritius.

British Foreign Minister David Lammy said the deal settled the contested sovereignty of Britain's last overseas territory in Africa, while securing the long-term future of the Diego Garcia military base, jointly operated by the UK and the US.

## The archipelago

The Chagos archipelago, comprising 58 islands, lies roughly 500 km to the south of the Maldives archipelago in the Indian Ocean. The islands were discovered in the late 18th century, when the French brought in Indian workers to work in newly-established coconut plantations on the islands to the British.

In 1965, the UK constituted the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), of which the Chagos Islands were a central part. Chagos was attached to Mauritius, another British colony in the Indian Ocean, for administrative purposes.

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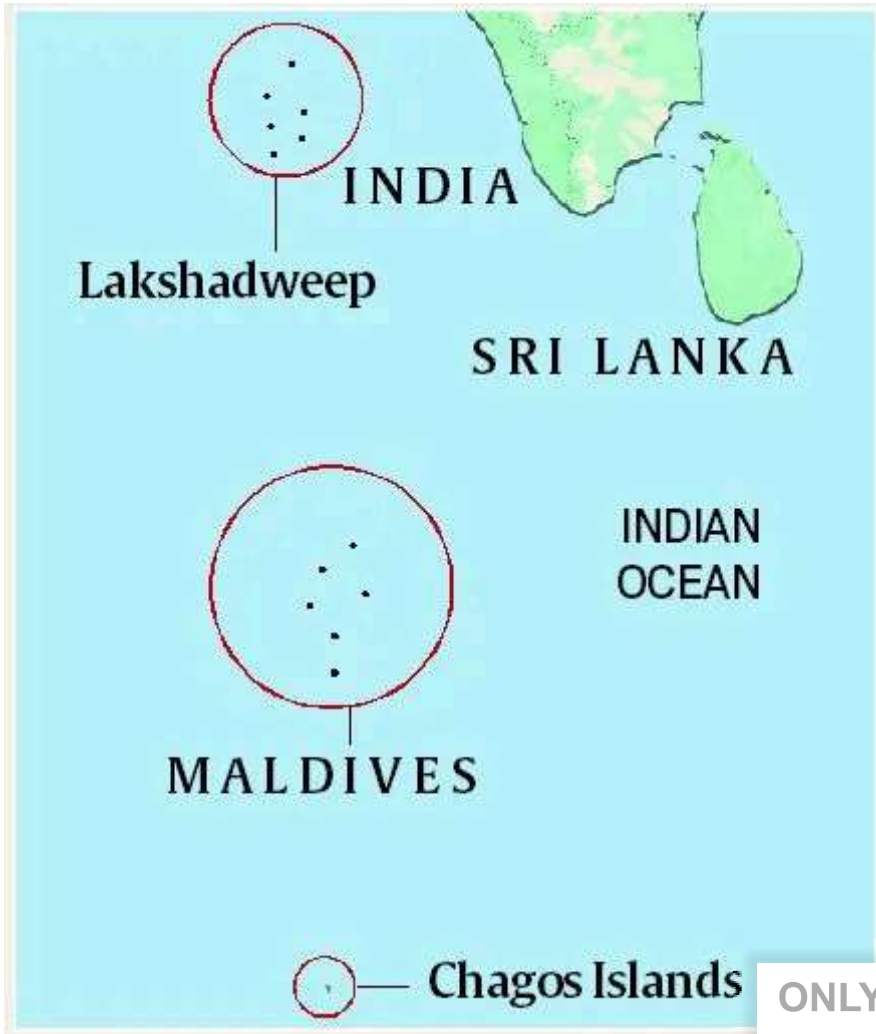
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When Mauritius gained independence in 1968, Chagos remained with Britain. The UK government gave the newly-independent country a grant of 3 million pounds over the "detachment" of the Chagos archipelago.



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### Strategic military base

Behind Britain retaining sovereignty over the Chagos Islands was its strategic location. In 1966, Britain signed an agreement with the US which made the BIOT available for the two countries' defence needs. Land was acquired in 1967, and four

The BIOT administration then enacted an Immigration Ordinance, which made it unlawful for a person to enter or remain in Diego Garcia without a permit, and enabled the removal of those who remained on the island. Around 2,000 civilians were subsequently kicked out — an issue that has been central to the dispute between the UK and Mauritius.

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Diego Garcia became a fully operational military base in 1986. According to an article in the Foreign Policy magazine, “Thanks to its vital location, the island houses a military base that served as a critical node for American air operations during the Gulf War and the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Post-9/11, it has also been allegedly used as a detention centre by the [US intelligence agency] CIA.”

Given the ongoing tensions in West Asia, maintaining a presence in the Indian Ocean remains critical for US interests. Diego Garcia also gives the Americans an outpost to monitor the Malacca Strait, a chokepoint especially vital to China.

### Treaty’s significance

Mauritius has long claimed that the UK illegally occupies Chagos, and has raised the matter many times in international fora.

In 2017, the UN General Assembly voted to ask the [International Court of Justice](#) to examine the legal status of the Chagos archipelago. Two years later, the UNGA

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United Kingdom unconditionally withdraw its colonial administration from the area within six months”.

Then ICJ President Abdulqawi Ahmed Yusuf had said the detachment of the Chagos archipelago in 1965 from Mauritius was not based on a “free and genuine expression of the people concerned”.

The agreement between the UK and Mauritius strikes a balance. The UK has ceded claims over the islands, and Mauritius is now “free to implement a programme of resettlement on the islands of the Chagos Archipelago, other than Diego Garcia”.

The UK has also promised to create a new trust fund “for the benefit of Chagossians”.

However, the agreement allows the Diego Garcia base to remain operational for an “initial period” of 99 years. The UK will continue to exercise sovereign rights over the island.

The resolution of the dispute has broader implications. As the Foreign Policy article noted: “If left unresolved... the issue could drive countries such as Mauritius to seek redress with alternative partners like China.”



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As a nation formerly colonised by Britain, India has maintained steadfast support to Mauritius’ claims over the Chagos Islands. It voted in favour of the island country at the UNGA in 2019. In recent years, India has attempted to deepen its ties with Mauritius amidst China’s ever increasing assertiveness in the Indian Ocean. Earlier

island dependency of mauritius in the western indian ocean.

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