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Source: HumEnglish.com

*Virtue-Signalling over National Interest:  
The British Surrender to Mauritius of the Chagos Island*

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Sir Keir Starmer’s decision to relinquish British sovereignty over the Chagos Islands to Mauritius marks a monumental shift in the UK’s geopolitical posture. The handover, cloaked in rhetoric about “righting historical wrongs,” has ignited controversy not seen since Brexit. The Prime Minister’s move appears to be the culmination of an ideological crusade aimed at dismantling remnants of British imperial infrastructure, regardless of the cost to the nation’s international standing. Far from being the result of political calculus, this decision reflects an agenda to erase historical ties, raising serious concerns about Britain’s long-term strategic interests and the Labour government’s understanding of foreign policy.



**Source:** Encyclopaedia Britannica.

### **Historical Context and Background**

The Chagos Archipelago, a British Overseas Territory (BOT), has occasionally been the focus of international disputes, yet Mauritius’ claims over the islands have appeared consistently fragile and unsubstantiated. When Mauritius gained independence from the Crown in 1968, it agreed to a previous settlement with the UK that explicitly waived any future claims to the Chagos Islands in return for £3m (The Lancaster House agreement of 23 September 1965). The legal case was seemingly closed, but decades later, the issue resurfaced, with Mauritius attempting to rewrite history.

In 2019, the International Court of Justice (ICJ) issued an advisory opinion on the legal status of the Chagos Islands. The ICJ concluded that the UK's continued administration of the islands was unlawful under international law. The key point of the ICJ's ruling was its reading of decolonization. The court stated that the separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius in 1965, prior to Mauritius gaining independence in 1968, was a violation of the process of decolonization. The court argued that the split of the Indian Ocean colony occurred without the consent of the people, thus breaching international law regarding the right to self-determination. The ICJ thus advised that the UK must end its administration of the Chagos Islands "as rapidly as possible" and that the islands should be united to Mauritius. The ICJ's opinion was advisory, meaning it did not have binding legal force. However, it was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in a subsequent resolution, urging the UK to comply with the ICJ's ruling.

The UK rejected the ruling altogether, arguing that the islands were vital for military purposes, particularly due to the presence of the joint US-UK military base on Diego Garcia. Britain also claimed that the advisory opinion failed to take into account the agreement made with Mauritius during its independence process.

The ICJ's opinion was flimsy, built on tenuous legal foundations, and it did not account for the unique circumstances surrounding the archipelago's separation from Mauritius. Furthermore, the international dispute has been relatively low intensity, with many viewing it as a symbolic issue rather than one of immediate geopolitical importance. Successive British governments, recognizing the strategic role that the military installation on Diego Garcia plays in counterterrorism and regional security, wisely resisted calls to cede the islands, while paying lip service to British-Mauritian cooperation. In contrast, Starmer's hasted decision to bow to the ICJ's advisory opinion after years of oblivion demonstrates a worrying disregard for the UK's long-standing strategic imperatives.

## **Legal Challenges and Constitutional Implications**

From a legal standpoint, the transfer of the Chagos Islands BOT to Mauritius raises significant constitutional and sovereignty-related challenges. Central to this issue is the tension between the royal prerogative and parliamentary sovereignty. Under the royal prerogative, the Crown traditionally holds authority over foreign affairs, including matters of treaty-making and territorial negotiations. However, in cases involving the transfer of sovereignty or the disposal of Crown land, particularly land that is considered a strategic asset, parliamentary involvement becomes essential. On the contrary, the decision was taken during a parliamentary recess. This timing effectively shields the cabinet from scrutiny and parliamentary questions, allowing the handover to unfold with minimal accountability.

In this instance, the Chagos Islands, which have never been under Mauritian sovereignty, represent a unique case. They were separated from the Indian Ocean colony of which Mauritius was a part, before the latter was granted independence in 1968, meaning the islands were never an inherent part of the Mauritian state. This historical distinction weakens the legal foundation of Mauritius' claims. The notion of transferring Crown land—territory that remains under British sovereignty—to another country without a formal Act of Parliament raises serious concerns about undermining the UK's constitutional framework. When sovereignty is at stake, particularly over an overseas territory of this magnitude, parliamentary approval is not merely a courtesy, but a legal necessity.

Moreover, there is the issue of the Chagossians, the indigenous population forcibly displaced in the 1970s to make way for the base at Diego Garcia. Many of these people have since been granted British citizenship, further entrenching their ties to the UK. The proposed transfer of the islands to Mauritius, a country with significantly lower levels of development and governance standards, would effectively strip the Chagossians of their connection to British citizenship and impose a new, less favourable national identity upon them. As British citizens, they have legitimate claims to be the primary stakeholders in any decision regarding the future of the Chagos Islands. Their rights to return and their entitlement to restitution should be a central consideration, rather than the claims of a state that never held sovereignty over the archipelago.



**Source:** TWZ.com. The strategic base of Diego Garcia.

In bypassing these complexities, Starmer's decision to move forward without parliamentary debate or due legal process signals a worrying disregard for constitutional norms, setting a dangerous precedent for future decisions on territorial sovereignty.

### **The International Context: A Strategic Misstep?**

Diego Garcia, the largest island in the archipelago, is home to a significant joint US-UK military base, critical to projecting power across the Indian Ocean, Middle East, and Africa. The USA has long opposed any transfer of sovereignty that would threaten its strategic foothold. By acceding to Mauritius' demands, Starmer risks not only straining the UK-US relationship but also ceding influence in a region increasingly contested by China. Mauritius, which has cultivated deep ties with Beijing, could leverage this territorial gain to expand China's presence in the Indian Ocean. While the UK has retained a 99-year lease over Diego Garcia, nothing now prevents Mauritius from authorizing a Chinese military base nearby to counter the UK and US presence in the archipelago; a prospect that would shift the regional balance of power, undermining both British and American interests.

Trading hard power, the military capability and strategic positioning of Diego Garcia, for soft power, through moral gestures of decolonization, is a dubious bargain. In a world where geopolitical tensions are rising, and China is assertively expanding its influence, Starmer's approach appears dangerously naïve. The Labour government's attempt to recast Britain as a champion of international law and human rights may win applause in certain diplomatic circles, but it comes at the cost of tangible security interests.

This decision comes at a time of unprecedented global instability. China's aggressive expansion in the South China Sea and its growing influence across Africa and the Indian Ocean Rim are destabilizing regional security dynamics. Russia's war in Ukraine and ongoing conflicts in the Middle East have stretched Western military and diplomatic resources. In this volatile context, the Chagos Archipelago represents far more than a legal or moral issue: it is a geographical stronghold essential to maintaining military projection across multiple theatres of conflict. The loss of the Diego Garcia's monopoly in the area, or its gradual encroachment by China-friendly regimes, would significantly weaken the West's capacity to respond to emerging threats.

### **What's Next? Emboldening Argentina and Spain**

The surrender of the Chagos Islands may also embolden other states with territorial claims against Britain. Argentina, still aggrieved over the Falkland/Malvinas Islands, could view this as an opportune moment to renew its demands for sovereignty.

The growing strategic importance of the Falklands is increasingly linked to Antarctica, as it serves as a vital base for operations in the region. Rich in natural resources, including oil, gas, and minerals, the territories are becoming critical as global demand rises. Climate change is further enhancing their significance, with melting ice in Antarctica opening up new shipping routes and access to previously unreachable resources. As focus shifts towards the Arctic and Antarctic, maintaining control over the Falklands is essential for ensuring strategic military and economic interests in this vital area.

Similarly, Spain, which has long contested British control of Gibraltar, could see the Chagos precedent as a diplomatic opening.

Gibraltar holds strategic significance due to its location at the entrance to the Mediterranean Sea, serving as a critical gateway for naval and commercial traffic. Its proximity to North Africa and the Iberian Peninsula makes it a vital military outpost for the UK, facilitating the projection of power in the region. The territory is also crucial for monitoring maritime activities and securing trade routes.

Britain's territorial holdings are not just symbols of its imperial past; they represent strategic assets that underpin its global influence. If Starmer's government signals a willingness to cede these assets for diplomatic goodwill, it risks emboldening adversaries and undermining long-standing British foreign policy commitments.

### **Starmer's Foreign Policy: A Critical Miscalculation**

Keir Starmer's decision to surrender the Chagos Islands is emblematic of a Labour government that has failed to grasp the complexities of global power dynamics. In a misguided attempt to appease international legal bodies and curry favour with former colonies, Starmer has endangered Britain's strategic interests and, by extension, those of its closest allies.

Labour's approach to foreign policy increasingly resembles virtue-signalling on a grand scale, with little regard for the long-term consequences. Starmer's government appears willing to sacrifice Britain's hard-won geopolitical standing for short-term diplomatic victories. But in a world where military power and strategic positioning are more crucial than ever, these decisions could come back to haunt both Britain and its allies.

In sum, the Chagos Islands affair illustrates Labour's troubling naivety in international affairs. Far from righting historical wrongs, this decision has endangered Britain's security, weakened its alliances, and emboldened its adversaries. In the process, it has revealed a government more interested in posturing than protecting the nation's interests.

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