

Geopolitics: Mauritius' Claim over the Chagos Seen as the Awakening of Emerging and Non-aligned Countries in a Chronicle in Rebounds

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ABSTRACT

This article sheds light on the recent deliberation made by Mauritius, a republic in the Indian Ocean, concerning its claim for sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago, a distant island which the country claims as its ownership. A recent meeting at the seat of the United Nations gave 94 votes in favour of Mauritius retaining the Chagos Archipelago with 15 abstentions and 63 countries refraining from voting either for or against. This perspective gave Mauritius a high degree of legitimacy regarding its sovereignty claim since the Chagos were excised at the time when Mauritius was claiming its independence. This was done under dubious causes making the Chagossians inhabitants leave the islands by force between 1965 and 1973. The position of Mauritius for sovereignty has been a major geopolitical issue since the USA and Great Britain commonly decided to have a militarized base in Diego Garcia, one of the islands of the Chagos. This article proceeds by explaining the current situation that provided a positive response to Mauritius but goes also a little back in history to recall how the Cold War remained an enigmatic chess game to deter a small-island state like Mauritius from claiming the Chagos. Now that the Cold War is something of the past, there is full legitimacy for Mauritius to call for a referendum in favour of the retrocession of the Chagos. This burning geopolitical issue has gained momentum although the outcome of the forthcoming deliberations still remains unclear. This article posits that non-aligned and emerging nations siding with Mauritius for the Chagos cause might offer a lesson to the world regarding a claim that remains to-date one of the ultimate fights for the real independence of Mauritius embarking on its Golden Jubilee Independence Anniversary in 2018.

Keywords: Chagos, Mauritius, Geopolitics, Cold War and Historical perspective.

1. INTRODUCTION

The outcome of the deliberations on Mauritius' claim to the Chagos Archipelago justified the plight of Mentor Mister Sir Anerood Jugnauth and the leader of the Chagos Refugee Group Olivier Bancoult along with the contribution of the Chagossian and the Mauritian community. The vote of the 94 countries to obtain an Advisory Opinion of the International Court of Justice on the territorial integrity of the Mauritian Republic contributes to justice, especially since these States in favour of the vote are part of the emerging and non-aligned countries [1].

This has been, at the same time, a long battle for Mauritius to be seek its legitimately right over the Chagos Archipelago and to better secure recognition from different nations of the world in its plight for its sovereignty on these islands.

2. THE CHAGOS ISLANDS IN PERSPECTIVE

The Chagos Archipelago or Iles Chagos is a group of seven atolls comprising more than 60 individual tropical islands in the Indian Ocean. The Chagos were home to the Chagossians for more than a century and a half until the United Kingdom evicted them between 1967 and 1973 to allow the United States build a military base on Diego Garcia, the largest of the Chagos Islands. Since 1971, only the atoll of Diego Garcia is inhabited, and only by military and civilian contracted personnel [2].

It is stated by the Chagossian descendants living in Mauritius that the islanders' parents lived in Peros Banos, Salomon and Diego Garcia islands mainly before they were forced to exile



Chart 1: Map representing the Chagos Archipelago in the Indian Ocean [3]

to mainland Mauritius owing to the creation of the military base of Diego Garcia—at the Southern part of the archipelago—when a military base was developed on the island.

3. THE ROLE OF EMERGING AND NON-ALIGNED COUNTRIES

The positive response of India is very well perceived by the Mauritian authorities, especially since this great friendly country has always wanted to be aside with Mauritius in this long struggle that our Chagossian brothers have been leading for more than half a century. As non-aligned countries, India, as well as Egypt, Cuba and South Africa, among many others, have supported the Mauritian cause. The position of non-aligned countries takes into account the importance of “securing the national independence, sovereignty, territorial integrity and security of non-aligned countries in their struggle against imperialism, colonialism, neo-colonialism, racism and all forms of foreign aggression, occupation, domination, interference or hegemony as well as against the great power and politics of the bloc”, as affirmed by Fidel Castro in the Declaration of Havana in 1979 [4].

Emerging countries, too, are in the position of the non-aligned countries of which Mauritius is a part like almost all African countries. The prospect of uniting against the former colonial powers remains laudable, especially as these countries have made great efforts to combat colonialism and state control by a foreign force. The case of the Chagos is of critical concern, particularly in the way in the excision was carried out under dubious and vague conditions. To date, 15 countries have aligned themselves with the British anti-liberalisation position. However, there are a few abstentions from various countries including members of the powerful European Union and former English dominions such as Australia and Canada. Quite a few developed countries have preferred to abstain either to counter the ‘Brexit’, which has weakened the club of wealthy countries in Western Europe, or by respecting treaties of economic cooperation with the world's greatest power, the United States. The fear of hurting ‘Uncle Sam’ would certainly have tipped in favour of the opposition vote.

In this regard, one can only warmly welcome the contribution of the emerging and non-aligned countries that have supported Mauritius while defying the intimidation that the United States and the United Kingdom might have caused. It is natural to find Argentina on the Mauritian side because this sovereign state had already opposed the British in the Falklands War in 1982 when it wanted to merge these islands with the Argentine mainland [5]. The Mauritian government also appreciates the position of the countries of South America, which have largely rallied to its cause.

4. A SMALL DIPLOMATIC THREAT

There was some reservation regarding the position of Mauritius just after Independence in 1968 because the country was in a position where it was obliged to accept accommodating the Chagos community exiled from their homeland. There were attempts from leftist parties in Mauritius to claim sovereignty over the Chagos. In 1982 following the victory of a left-party coalition known as the MMM-PSM, an article in Time (US Magazine) stated that ‘the US could fear a small diplomatic threat’ from Mauritius under the newly-elected government that wanted to reclaim the Chagos as part of its own territory [6].

5. THE DICE GAME OF POWER AND ACTIVISM

The claim of the Chagos as part of the Mauritian territory illustrates Mauritius’ long-term struggle against the imperial colonial powers. The Cold War after World War II was meant to be a game of dice not only on land but especially in the sea. The Cold War, in essence, was the name given to the relationship that developed primarily between the USA and the ex-Soviet Union after World War II. It dominated international affairs for decades and many major crises occurred—the Vietnam War, Hungary war, Cuban missile crisis, etc. [7].

In the seventies, Russian submarines followed every movement of their ‘natural enemies’, the United States. If tensions existed in the Atlantic with Cuba as a petty terror at the US gateway, the Indian Ocean was also a favourite region for the movement of warships. In the late 1970s, the Indian Ocean was heard as a demilitarised and war free zone, but this was only in words. The ambient Cold War was displayed by the ardent desire of the Americans to barricade the seas strategically so as to better follow the Russian evolution under the rule of Leonid Brezhnev. At the end of 1979, in view of the obstinate American presence in Diego Garcia, the former Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan in order to consolidate its presence in the region. The incessant movements of Russian vessels in the Indian Ocean and the efforts of the Russians to seek allies, including Madagascar and the Seychelles, could be here emphasised [8].

One might also recall that militancy, a philosophy adopted by the left parties, including the local leftist party Mouvement Militant Mauricien (MMM), was also drawn from the communist ideology advocated by the Soviets. To counteract this prospect, the willingness to leave the Americans establish and consolidate a military base in Diego Garcia was of particular importance as agitations gained ground in the region, particularly in view of the mullahs’ return under Ayatollah Khomeiny to Iran, the Indo-Pakistani crisis, the nine-year Holy War between Iran and Iraq (1980-89) and the first tensions in Afghanistan. History recalls the destruction of a Korean Airlines Flight 007, a four engine 747-230B carrying 237 passengers over the Hokkaido armed zone occupied by the Soviets [9].

6. CALL FOR A ZONE OF PEACE-A UTOPIA

During those years, the petition for a zone of peace and the liberation of the Chagos were seen as utopian arguments from militant thinkers who wanted to get rid of imperialism, domination and the expulsion of free but poor peoples. The Conference, convinced of the desirability of strengthening the concept of the zone of peace in the Indian Ocean through a system of universal collective security, without military alliances, called upon the littoral and hinterland States to refrain from participating in military alliances or pacts and, in that connection, expressed satisfaction that Certain littoral and hinterland States have withdrawn from membership in military alliances and pacts conceived in the context of great power rivalries, thus contributing to the peace and security of the region [10].

There was a first meeting in 1979 initiated by the British government when Sir Richard Luce came to Mauritius as an envoy of Lady Margaret Thatcher to at least listen to the Chagossians plea, called 'Ilois' at that time, and listen to their grievances [11]. Previously under the Harold Wilson regime, a meagre compensation was on the agenda and nothing else because the question of the return the Chagos to its people was discarded under the sneaky contribution of the American big brother.

7. THE FALL OF THE BERLIN WALL AS A TRIGGER FOR NEW REVIVAL OF THE NON-ALIGNED

The geopolitical situation changed in the late 1980s following the fall of the Berlin Wall, opening the door to democracy, the weakening followed by the collapse of the Russian bloc and also the certain death of the Cold War [12]. This major event gave rise to greater legitimacy on the part of non-aligned and independent countries who wanted to be more open about their demonstration of strength in a number of instances. Thus, the Russian occupation was abandoned in Afghanistan giving way to a new configuration, hence the long American occupation ... The non-aligned wanted to believe in a more open economic development than before by liberalising their economies and their markets predominated by a Marxist economy.

In the Indian Ocean, it was finally believed that the Chagos could be handed over to the Mauritian authorities, since the first treaty of the American occupation of Diego Garcia was scheduled to expire in 2015. But this was not the case because the British wanted to build a marine park at the Chagos for supposedly protecting the maritime zone falling under their jurisdiction from a community called the British Indian Ocean Territory known by former primary school students such as BIOT. The islanders have claimed the marine park was a ploy to block their return, saying it would make it impossible for them to live there as it would ban fishing, their main livelihood [13]. The deadlines for delaying or more effectively dismissing the chances of retrocession were accelerated with threats to existing and long-nurtured trade agreements between Mauritius and Great Britain and the United States.

The unswerving support of the 94 countries shows that the Chagossians and Mauritians are beginning to feel their impact when the emerging countries are encountering sustained economic growth along with the non-aligned countries that do not more trust this untimely geopolitical chessboard in their diplomatic relations.

Mauritius has always called for the complete completion of the decolonisation process. It called the former colonial power to discuss for a credible and just solution but her efforts remained unsuccessful. The General Assembly has a direct institutional role on this issue given its role in the process of decolonisation in the world. It is responsible for completing the process of decolonisation, including in Mauritius. Accordingly, at the request of the Government of Mauritius, the General Assembly included in the agenda of its seventy-first session an item entitled "Request for an advisory opinion of the International Court of Justice on the

legal consequences The separation of the archipelago of Chagos from Mauritius in 1965 [14]."

This beautiful effort of solidarity bears fruit and augurs with a certain hope as Mauritius embarks graciously in its 50 years of independence without clearly estimating when the light of true hope will emerge ...

8. VOICES AGAINST THE REFERENDUM

Given that the Mauritian case a high level of acceptance from international instances, there were voices against it especially from Great Britain and the United States. To quote the United States position:

"The dispute between the UK and Mauritius does not pertain to an issue of decolonisation. It was a bilateral territorial dispute," the United States representative said. One of the key points in the argument of the States voting against the resolution is that the dispute should be discussed between the two parties. "This will be a political party," she said [15]. According to Mitra (2017), despite this proposal, the Trump administration wasn't convinced enough to change tack, as the Pentagon was apprehensive that the base on Diego Garcia will not be as secure if Mauritius attempts resettlement on the surrounding islands [16].

Another point, however, was put forward by the British: the absence of the excision of the Chagossians during the bilateral discussions. "We were surprised to see that Mauritius included in its resolution the excision of Chagossians from the island. The British representative said that this was because it was not discussed during bilateral talks." The latter, argues that the British are extremely embarrassed for the conditions in which the Chagossians were forced to leave. To add that the British continue to support the Chagossians financially [17].

It would be also to see the position of countries that abstained from the referendum as they were quite a relatively large number—63. France was one of those countries that drew attention from the Mauritian counterparts given that it has strong economic and financial ties with Mauritius since almost two centuries. The stance of France could be interpreted in two ways. Firstly, France stated that this was a matter that should be dealt only with the two protagonists involved; Mauritius and Great Britain. Secondly, France is itself in a delicate position since Mauritius has another litigation with France over Tromelin, a coral atoll, near Madagascar over which there is the contentious issue of sovereignty. Here again, the matter has not yet been set down [18].

9. CONCLUSION

So far, the demand for Mauritius has been a part of its long-term plan to regain the Chagos. There was some apparent apprehension regarding the position taken by the Mentor Minister, Sir Anerood Jugnauth concerning the claim for an Advisory Opinion because some onlookers stated that this would end up in the form of procrastination or postponement of the agenda forwarded by Mauritius. The majority vote over the claim for the Chagos shows that there

is ongoing support and concern for this cause. This comes especially from developing nations that see this effort as a bid to show that 'unity in strength' could be a game changing scenario. Too often, the power of the rich nations over the developing ones is seen as a natural cause for their influence in geopolitics. The stance taken by Mauritius is commendable because the fight has been ongoing since the country gained its independence. It is now considered as a cause for justice with higher acceptance from emerging and non-aligned nations that are forming a major economic bloc that counters imperialism in the world.

10. END NOTE

This article emanated from a 'leader' that the author published in a full-page article in the Mauritian afternoon tabloid 'Le Mauricien' in French language. The core text has been translated for the needs of a journal article with subsequent improvements made namely in terms of additional information, inserts and citations needed for a journal article. This technique allows the opinion article to be better posited as a research article that becomes authoritative oriented readership.

A cartographical display of countries that voted for (Green), Red (Against) and Yellow (Abstentions) is shown in the chart appended for this article. Courtesy: L'express.mu.23rd June 2017.

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