



Security Nexus Perspective

IN THIS OCEAN, SMALL STATES LEARN TO SPEAK

By Shyam Tekwani

Port Louis | 28 February 2026: Mauritius suspended diplomatic relations with the Maldives after Malé rejected Mauritian sovereignty over the Chagos Archipelago and objected to the UK–Mauritius transfer agreement. A dispute long expanding beneath the surface has now broken into open view.

At daybreak the Indian Ocean looks innocent, a sheet of brightness with a few ships moving like afterthoughts, as if trade and strategy were things that happened elsewhere, on other waters with better publicity. Yet the ocean has never cared for theatre. It keeps its meaning in distances and depths, in routes that harden into habit, in the way a single runway on a speck of coral can rearrange the confidence of capitals thousands of miles away. If you stare at the map long enough, your eye returns again and again to the same places: the chokepoints, the straits, the island chains that seem too small to matter until you remember that smallness is often a form of concealment.

The [Chagos Archipelago](#) sits out there like that: remote, spare, and almost deliberately unphotogenic from the heights at which diplomacy prefers to look. Administered since 1965 as the British Indian Ocean Territory, or [BIOT](#), it has existed in a strange bureaucratic limbo: formally a colonial possession, strategically indispensable, and humanly emptied to make it so. It is easy to mistake it for a footnote, a scattering between Africa and Southeast Asia, a name that appears in legal submissions and security briefings before receding behind acronyms. Yet the Indian Ocean has never rewarded that kind of misreading. In these waters, an “afterthought” can become an anchor, a “periphery” can turn out to be a hinge, and a place most people cannot point to on a map can still decide what is possible for those who can.

What is [unfolding around Chagos](#) is more than a sovereignty dispute; it is a demonstration that small island states have moved from objects to agents of Indian Ocean geopolitics. Mauritius, the Maldives, and the United Kingdom are the three principals in the argument’s current phase, but the contest draws in the United States, India, and China, and beneath every legal filing and diplomatic communiqué runs the older, unresolved story of the Chagossians themselves, the people for whom this ocean was once simply home.

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Port Louis believed it had finally reached the end of a long argument when [London agreed](#), in October 2024, [to transfer sovereignty over Chagos](#) - even as it insisted, quietly and firmly, on arrangements that would keep Diego Garcia functioning as it has for decades. For Mauritius, the deal was less a triumph than a completion: the slow correction of an interrupted map, [the closing of a colonial parenthesis](#) that had hung open since the twilight of empire. The language surrounding the agreement was careful, almost restrained, because the story Mauritius wished to tell was not one of victory, but of vindication; of patience rewarded through law rather than spectacle.

Then [Malé moved](#), and what had seemed settled began to shift again.

The [Maldives' rejection](#) of Mauritius' claim did not merely reopen a legal question; it unsettled the regional geometry that had quietly formed around it. What might once have remained a bilateral matter hardened into something more exposed, a reminder that the Indian Ocean does not easily contain its disputes. The moment Malé stepped into it, the argument ceased to be a conversation between London and Port Louis, becoming instead a regional dispute over proximity, entitlement, and maritime space, about who draws lines in an ocean that resists being partitioned.

It is tempting to reduce this to a quarrel over territory, but territory is only the visible layer. Beneath it lies the harder fact of [Diego Garcia](#). The base is the gravitational center around which the rest of the argument circles. For the United States and the United Kingdom, it has long been a platform that compresses distance, making the Middle East feel closer and the Indo-Pacific more governable. Its reliability, its insulation from the political tempers that unsettle mainland bases, has been part of its value. Yet isolation, in geopolitics, is never permanent. Even remoteness can be politicized.

For Mauritius, sovereignty over Chagos means jurisdiction: the right to speak with authority over an expanded maritime envelope that carries economic consequence. Fisheries, licensing regimes, seabed speculation, the ordinary arithmetic of an exclusive economic zone, these are not abstractions for an island state. They are the scaffolding of fiscal stability and the grammar of diplomatic standing. Port Louis understands that sovereignty is not merely a historical claim; it is a multiplier of presence.

For the Maldives, the argument bends differently. Chagos lies closer to Malé than to London, and in maritime politics proximity has a way of acquiring moral tone. In an era when [maritime boundaries decide futures](#) - who fishes where, who licenses what, who controls the seabed and the cables beneath it - geography is never merely geographic. It becomes argument. It becomes possibility. It becomes leverage.

But no contemporary claim over Chagos can be separated from the earlier displacement that made the present arrangement possible.

Between 1968 and 1973, the United Kingdom removed the archipelago's population to enable the construction of military facilities on Diego Garcia. Empires rarely imagine that their footnotes will become the center of someone else's history. They write in confidence, assuming permanence. The ocean is less persuaded. It absorbs, it waits, and sometimes it returns what was once dismissed - altered by time, but not erased. The Chagossians are that return, their communities still pursuing legal and diplomatic avenues seeking recognition of their right of return.

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It is why sovereignty for Mauritius cannot rest comfortably on legality alone. If sovereignty restores territory but leaves dignity deferred, it risks becoming another transfer conducted in the language of management. The Chagossians remain the quiet center of the dispute, not because they dominate diplomatic statements, but because their absence underwrites every claim. Without restitution, return, or meaningful acknowledgment, any settlement carries the residue of the logic that first removed them.

Malé's intervention lands on this layered terrain. It complicates the story Mauritius hoped to close. It reframes Chagos not solely as a decolonization question, but as [a regional one](#), and in doing so it exposes how fragile closure can be in a crowded ocean.

The Maldives' position also reflects a domestic rhythm that is impossible to ignore. Under President Muizzu, [sovereignty has been articulated](#) not as abstract principle but as [lived assertion](#): particularly in relation to [India's presence and influence](#). In small states, foreign policy rarely floats above domestic politics; it moves through it. Maritime claims become instruments of signaling, reminders that autonomy must be demonstrated as much as declared. Reopening Chagos fits within that arc. It signals that the Maldives will not simply inherit alignments crafted elsewhere, but intends to test them.

What appears as a diplomatic quarrel between two island states is also a sign of something larger: small states in the Indian Ocean are no longer merely navigating great-power rivalry; they are [beginning to speak](#) into the waters in which it unfolds.

The larger actors, meanwhile, are forced into recalculation.

India has [long aligned](#) itself with Mauritius' claim, not only out of principle but out of strategic coherence. A stable central Indian Ocean, anchored in predictable relationships, supports India's vision of maritime order. Yet India also requires a workable relationship with the Maldives, whose location intersects with sea lanes and security geometries that New Delhi cannot disregard. When Malé repositions itself, India faces a delicate balance: to appear steady without appearing heavy, to support Mauritius [without alienating the Maldives](#), to project continuity without foreclosing dialogue.

For the United States and the United Kingdom, continuity at Diego Garcia remains paramount. Yet legitimacy is no longer peripheral to strategy. A base that appears politically contested, even if operationally secure, becomes vulnerable in narrative terms. And in an age where narratives travel faster than fleets, perception acquires strategic weight.

China need not enter the dispute directly to benefit from its turbulence. It has already demonstrated, through port investments from [Hambantota](#) to [Gwadar](#) and through its expanding naval presence in the western Indian Ocean, that it can build strategic footholds [through patience](#) rather than confrontation. Influence often grows in the interstices of other powers' discomfort, in the pauses between certainty and reaction. If alignments fray, if regional solidarity weakens, if India's relationships become more brittle, [strategic space opens](#) without a single declarative move from Beijing.

Beyond these calculations lies a quieter concern: the cumulative effect of dispute on the cohesion of small island states themselves. The very fracture now visible between Port Louis and Malé illustrates

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the risk. These states have [built collective authority](#) around shared vulnerability to [rising seas and climate volatility](#). Public fractures over maritime claims risk diluting that solidarity at precisely the moment when unity has become the amplifier of their global voice. Sovereignty disputes can energize domestic politics, but they can also erode the shared moral platform from which small states have negotiated internationally.

And yet, it would be mistaken to read this only as instability. There is also maturation here. Small island states are no longer content to be administered within someone else's design. They test boundaries: legal, diplomatic, narrative, because they understand that silence concedes space. They diversify partnerships because dependence is a narrowing corridor. They maneuver because maneuvering is survival.

Port Louis seeks closure, and perhaps a measure of vindication, though closure that leaves the Chagossians unresolved will always carry a faint incompleteness, as if something essential has been deferred rather than repaired. Malé seeks room to breathe, to signal that proximity and sovereignty are not inherited but asserted. The larger powers seek continuity, which is to say predictability, in waters that have never been entirely predictable.

Whether these impulses can settle alongside one another is not yet clear. The Indian Ocean has entered a phase in which no arrangement feels permanently fixed, and where even agreements designed to close chapters seem capable of opening new ones. In such a setting, a reef chain becomes less a symbol than a test - of how far small states are prepared to stretch their space, and how cautiously larger powers must now tread around them.

By nightfall, ships will still follow their accustomed lanes. The base will hum as it has for decades. The tide will erase the visible traces of dispute, returning the shoreline to its habitual quiet. Yet something has shifted, not abruptly, not theatrically, but in the way coastlines shift: gradually, almost imperceptibly, until the map quietly changes. In this ocean, small islands are learning to speak in a voice once reserved for empires.

They were never truly small; it only appeared that way from a distance.

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