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Trump can block the U.K. deal to hand the Chagos Islands to a friend of China.

Why the U.S. Needs Diego Garcia

Have you heard about the dispute over a remote island vital to U.S. security? No, not Greenland. Spin the globe to the Indian Ocean, where President Trump is suddenly worried that Britain may give up sovereignty over the island of Diego Garcia. He has a good strategic point, but his late arrival to this debate is roiling British politics.

Mr. Trump posted on social media amid his Greenland spat that the U.K. “is currently planning to give away the Island of Diego Garcia, the site of a vital U.S. Military Base, to Mauritius, and to do so FOR NO REASON WHATSOEVER. There is no doubt that China and Russia have noticed this act of total weakness.”

It’s no exaggeration to call the joint U.S.-U.K. military post on the island roughly 1,000 miles southwest of India a vital forward military deployment. The base allows the U.S. to defend its interests quickly from the Pacific to the Middle East, and the outpost is essential for everything from logistics to parking U.S. B-2 bombers. The base lets the U.S. deploy air power over a wide area.

That makes it all the more strange that the Brits are moving forward with a deal to hand sovereignty of the Chagos Islands, where Diego Garcia is located, to the country of Mauritius. The deal lets the U.S. and the Brits keep using the military base on a 99-year lease, and the Biden Administration blessed the deal.

Oh, and so did the Trump Administration. The State Department said last May that the deal “secures the long-term, stable and effective operation” of the joint base. Where was Secretary of State Marco Rubio on that one?

Diego Garcia becomes more important as China expands its blue-water navy and establishes naval and air bases in the Indo-Pacific. Mauritius is friendly with Beijing, and it’s possible China could pressure the poor island nation to alter the lease in the future. It’s a mystery why the Trump Administration welcomed the deal, and the hour is late to change course. The handover to Mauritius was signed last year and has been working its way through Britain’s Parliament for ratification. The ceding of sovereignty seems to be related to the Labour Party’s guilt that Britain once had a colonial empire.

But Mr. Trump can still scuttle the Mauritius deal under a 1966 treaty between the U.K. and U.S. that established defense uses for the British Indian Ocean Territory. The treaty stipulates that “the Territory shall remain under United Kingdom sovereignty.”

Mr. Starmer is urging the U.S. not to blow up his Mauritius deal, but the President’s alert has awakened the opposition in Parliament. Tory leader Kemi Badenoch is on the case, and so is Reform Party leader Nigel Farage. Mr. Starmer, currently on a trip to Beijing, has said he’s sticking with the Mauritius deal.

Mr. Trump didn’t help his case to persuade Mr. Starmer with his week-long threats over Greenland and NATO. But he’s right on the need for Diego Garcia. As for the Brits, they no longer have an empire, but they remain a close U.S. ally, and the partnership has been a bulwark of global freedom for a century. The joint base is best kept in the free world’s hands.