# Greenland and the Spectre of Dispossession

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18.01.2026 doi: 10.59704/52cfa1a3e646c119

When it came to grabbing territory, the British had effective techniques by the 1960s. Morning-tea at Downing Street could accomplish what a U.S President's incontinent media posts have been threatening to do with much froth and fury since 2019. The creation of the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT) by detaching the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius was secured when the Mauritian premier Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam met Sir Harold Wilson, Britain's Labour Prime Minister, one morning in 1965. The dispossession of the Chagossians should now serve as a cautionary tale for Greenland, and also cause us to question the primacy being attributed to NATO's security in current political posturing. In what follows I argue that Greenland, like the Chagos Archipelago, might find itself dismembered and carved up to serve the security interests of Europe. The path to dispossession is being built on the fallacy that the Arctic zone presents a security threat to the U.S and Europe. The true peril, however, comes from the interconnected vulnerabilities of climate destruction and the proliferation of nuclear weapons.

## Dispossession for security

Back in 1965, the U.S had grown nervous about African and Asian states asserting and gaining independence from erstwhile imperial powers. Bandung and the Non-Aligned Movement of newly independent states sought horizons beyond the Cold War orbit of the U.S or U.S.S.R. This meant that the projection of military power of the Western alliance through overseas military bases in Asian and African countries felt less secure. The U.K government was also keen to procure nuclear technology and armaments from the U.S. Securing Polaris submarine-launched ballistic missiles (SLBM) to serve as Britain's nuclear deterrent came at a price. Carving out the territory of BIOT from Mauritius so that the U.S could go on to establish a military base at Diego Garcia was a secretive part of the military exchange and deal. It is this kind of security exchange or quid pro quo that is now being touted as the reason the U.S. wants to acquire Greenland.

The ICJ Advisory Opinion on the Legal Consequences of the Separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius (2019) offers further insights on how the islands came to be detached. On 22 September 1965, a note was prepared by the Private Secretary to Sir Harold Wilson in the following terms:

> *"Sir Seewoosagur Ramgoolam [later the first Prime Minister of Mauritius] is coming to see you at 10:00 tomorrow morning. The object is to frighten him with hope: hope that he might get independence; Fright lest he might not unless he is sensible about the detachment of the Chagos Archipelago. I attach a brief prepared by the Colonial Office, with which the Ministry of Defence and the Foreign Office are on the whole content. The key sentence in the brief is the last sentence of it on page three." (para. 105)*

That sentence read:

> *"The Prime Minister may therefore wish to make some oblique reference to the fact that H.M.G. [Her Majesty's Government] have the legal right to detach Chagos by Order in Council, without Mauritius consent but this would be a grave step." (para. 106, emphasis in the original)*

An Order in Council within the British constitutional framework is the exercise of authority without recourse to Parliament. Two events then followed on 23 September 1965. First, Prime Minister Wilson met Premier Ramgoolam and told him that:

> *"in theory there were a number of possibilities. The Premier and his colleagues could return to Mauritius either with Independence or without it. On the*

> *Defence point, Diego Garcia could either be detached by order in Council or with the agreement of the Premier and his colleagues. The best solution of all might be Independence and detachment by agreement". (para. 107)*

The delegation from Mauritius agreed to the detachment of the Chagos Archipelago. What followed was the brutal depopulation of the islands and decades of exile for the Chagos Islanders. It is an exile and dispossession that they resisted and fought through multiple legal actions which I examine in detail here.

## Law after dispossession

Britain's refined imperial methods did not mean that butchery was beneath them. Caroline Elkins helped to expose the Mau Mau massacres carried out when the U.K. detained, tortured, and killed thousands of Kikuyu in Kenya in what should have been the dying-days of Empire; crimes that the UK Government acknowledged and settled in 2013 after legal proceedings led to payment of compensation. The latter should be a lesson for the wizened critics who claim that law is impotent in the face of the brutality of major powers. Mauritius and the cause of decolonisation had a major victory in the International Court of Justice in 2019, but the outcome did not necessarily benefit the exiled Chagos Islanders as I explained in more detail here.

The ICJ concluded that the decolonisation of Mauritius was not carried out in a manner consistent with the right of peoples to self-determination, and that the continued administration of the Chagos Archipelago by the UK is a "wrongful act entailing the international responsibility of that state" (para. 177). It also determined that the UK's separation of the Chagos Archipelago from Mauritius is an "unlawful act of a continuing character" (para. 177). It followed from this that the UK is under an

> *"obligation to bring an end to its administration of the Chagos Archipelago as rapidly as possible, thereby enabling Mauritius to complete the decolonization of its territory in a manner consistent with the right of peoples to self-determination" (para. 178).*

The UK government has begun the process of returning sovereignty over the territory to Mauritius, but with a costly lease-back of the island of Diego Garcia where the U.S military base will remain.

## Fragmenting Greenland

Thus far, Denmark has been unequivocal in its rejection of the U.S acquiring or 'owning' Greenland, but it has accepted the narrative that European troops should be deployed there. This narrative of Arctic insecurity is the wedge that exposes Greenland to acquisition and/or occupation. Among the many column-inches already expended on the U.S threat to annex Greenland is uncertainty about the status of a semi-autonomous territory which has no legal personality of its own in international law, and only indirect links to NATO and the European Union (see Alemanno). What is asserted by the U.S in relation to Greenland is a case of one sovereign coercing another to cede territory. Much of the commentary thus far has also been focused on a wholesale annexation of Greenland as that is what is coming, for now, from the U.S (see Neergard and Blockmans). But this may evolve to more fragmented absorption of territory (as with Diego Garcia), or to long-term leases and exchanges of property in return for European security.

It is clear that forced annexation would be illegal in international law (see Milanović). Greenland also has strong institutions including control of natural resources and mining; and is a semi-autonomous self-governing unit with a potential legal right to seek independence from Denmark (s.21 of the Greenland Self-Government Act 2009). There is enthusiasm in some quarters for exploiting Greenland's resources, especially rare earth minerals (see Ott). As with the Chagossians, however, Greenland's fate might be determined by sovereign states, be they the U.S, Denmark and NATO acting collectively, with a pretext of wider regional security considerations. The NATO Secretary-General Mark Rutter can hardly be relied on for diplomatic vigour or nuance after calling Trump 'Daddy'. What if securing U.S support for Europe's security, and its concomitant commitments to Ukraine, are contingent on some form of territorial sacrifice in

Greenland? While this may spell the demise of the principles and commitments that have held NATO together, there is no sign from across the Atlantic that the U.S Administration would lose sleep over that. This is a scenario that may see the replay of past colonial practices that have hardly gone away. The current U.S play for the territory of Greenland in its entirety may be a negotiating position that sees parts of the territory detached or subject to long-term lease such as with Diego Garcia.

## Something rotten

Can Denmark be trusted to hold the line? William Shakespeare had the premonition that there is 'something rotten in the state of Denmark' (Hamlet, Act 1, IV), and there are better reasons to pose the question now. Let's recall that in 2021 it was reported that Denmark's military-intelligence agency had assisted the U.S National Security Agency to tap the phones of European officials in Norway, Sweden, France, and Germany – including that of Chancellor Angela Merkel between 2012 and 2014. While this betrayal is not equivalent to what is now threatened by the U.S, so much for European solidarity! In the recent U.N. Human Rights Council Report on Greenland and Denmark (2025), the Independent Expert pointed to the structural discrimination and stereotyping of Inuit and Greenlandic people; continuing human rights violations and the lack of social cohesion between Greenlandic and Danish society (para. 35); and commented that:

> *"not all Inuit people feel represented by the government of Greenland and that they fear the flexible rules on Greenlandic permanent residency can easily be exploited by persons who seek to capitalize on Greenlandic natural resources for commercial gain. Moreover, the Inuit are unable to participate in investor-State arbitration cases involving extractive industries in their territory, nor do they have direct representation within European Union institutions; hence, they are limited in their ability to collectively defend their interests". (para. 31)*

For the indigenous peoples of Greenland who have to contend with a rampaging neighbour, the hardly benevolent Kingdom of Denmark, and the geopolitical impacts of climate destruction, the path ahead is fraught.

## Interconnected vulnerabilities

It would be absurd to pretend that asserting legal principles alone (be they national, European, or international) can help to evade a fate that has been visited upon indigenous peoples for the last 500 years. What we do know is that sovereign over-reach exposes the vulnerabilities of legal and political systems, and barely covers the actual weaknesses of these rapacious states. The assertion of sovereign exceptionality is never the end of the matter, as we have seen with the Chagossians who have resisted and fought back with every tool of law and politics.

Over the past weeks, the U.S has succeeded in making the 'security of the Arctic' a predominant concern in major European capitals. This is a distraction that only serves current U.S ambitions. There are other grave dangers that we are missing if so much attention is absorbed by North Atlantic security in these narrow terms. The overwhelming threat to all life on Earth comes from climate destruction and the unremitting threat posed by nuclear weapons. The fact that the Arctic now presents geopolitical relations that are in flux is partly due to the nexus between global warming, and the possibility that disputes in this region might, by malevolent action or accident, result in a nuclear catastrophe. If addressing climate destruction and the abolition of nuclear weapons could receive as much attention as media posts from the current occupant of the White House, there would be cause for hope.

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## SUGGESTED CITATION

Motha, Stewart: Greenland and the Spectre of Dispossession, Verfassungsblog, 18.01.2026, doi: 10.59704/52cfa1a3e646c119.

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Langzeitarchiviert bei IntRechtDok unter: doi.org/10.17176/20260118-172406-0.