

## **Strategic Salience of Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Economic and Military Dimensions**

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### **Introduction**

Accounting for 30 per cent of India's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) in the Bay of Bengal have been acknowledged as a distinctive strategic asset only in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Now labelled the 'unsinkable aircraft carrier', the islands provide India with a springboard to expand its strategic frontiers to its maritime east. By virtue of this change in outlook, the islands have figured more vividly in geopolitical discourse than ever before.<sup>2</sup> Prior to this shift in thought, the islands were considered to be more of a liability in India's security apparatus than an integral component of its larger national strategy. Post 1950 and prior to the turn of the new millennium, the ANI was governed by a policy characterised by 'benign neglect' and 'masterly inactivity'<sup>3</sup>, owing to its distance from the mainland, for the most part.

The eastern 'frontier'—as has been the recurring terminology used in the past—consists primarily of India's eastern extremities—the ANI included. The very notion that India's eastern-most reaches are mere territorial frontiers is a problematic one. It indicates a gross underestimation of the strategic value of these regions and the misplaced notion that India's territorial and strategic frontiers are one and the same. Consequently, the islands of Andaman and Nicobar, along with the eight north-eastern states, being part of this classification, have lagged behind their counterparts on the mainland in many respects. Thus, it is essential to distinguish between the two to gauge the extent to which the ANI allows India to expand its strategic frontiers well beyond the confines of its geographical territory.

For a long time, the national effort to capitalise on the islands seemed optimistic, at best. Despite its proximity to the Strait of Malacca, the world's busiest shipping lane and possibly its most integral chokepoint, and playing host to the

Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), India's first and only integrated command, the islands were scarcely referred to as a viable strategic asset.

Ever since the establishment of the ANC at Port Blair in 2001, however, India's approach on the utilisation and role of the ANI in its national strategy has been steadily shifting. The islands have witnessed a greater degree of governmental focus and rate of development, both, in the military domain as well as the commercial, in the last couple of years. This shift in approach is essential for India to better secure its sea trade passing through the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) near the Strait of Malacca and to maintain its maritime pre-eminence in its vicinity. Additionally, the ANI has been identified as a vital military asset in light of China's recent forays into the IOR. China's supposed activity on Coco Islands, a set of islands not far from the ANI, in particular, have been subject to much debate and discussion.

The Andaman and Nicobar islands have received additions and upgradations to its air-based and naval capabilities in the last decade or so. While such developments are sure to help, the ANI possesses great potential, much of which is yet to be incorporated into India's overarching strategic calculus. This paper aims to analyse possible security and economic dividends of developing the ANI as an asset of great national strategic importance, keeping in mind the prevailing geopolitical, socio-economic and cultural realities.

### **Geographical Salience: Linking Security and Economics**

The ANI's geographical orientation is perhaps its most standout characteristic. Located in close proximity to the busiest maritime chokepoint in the world and possessing a vast North-South spread spanning about 800 kilometres<sup>4</sup>, it provides India with a range of security-related and economic options. Traffic passing in and out of the Strait of Malacca routinely circumvent Great Nicobar and enter the 200-kilometre-wide Six Degree Channel<sup>5</sup>, while a smaller portion uses the Ten Degree Channel that separates the Andaman Islands from those of Nicobar. Such geographical traits and their subsequent economic pay-offs provide India with a platform and the impetus to maintain a certain degree of oversight and domain awareness in order to better secure its interests in the region.

Island territories provide nations with a variety of possibilities. From a military standpoint, they often serve as natural fortification against approaching hostile maritime assets while also doubling up as warning and surveillance posts.<sup>6</sup> This,

coupled with the presence of the integrated command in the case of the Andaman and Nicobar islands, should provide for a legitimate defensive counter against most traditional and non-traditional confrontational actions in the region, leading to the notion of the islands being India's very own 'island chain. Such a theorisation would imply that the ANI stands to play an integral role in India's power projection and forward posturing to its east, owing to its far-flung geographical location and thus, the logistical convenience it would provide. Although an island chain theorisation in this context might seem far-fetched at this point, China's aggressive progression in the maritime realm might make it inevitable.

The geographical contiguity of the islands to countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand further cement its strategic versatility. Landfall Island, the northern-most island in the chain is a mere 40 kilometres from the Coco Islands of Myanmar, while Indira Point, near Campbell Bay, is about 165 kilometres from Aceh in Indonesia.<sup>7</sup> Such statistics are especially important in the context of the Act East Policy adopted by India in 2014. For instance, Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum has given it the impetus to intensify its synergy with India in matters maritime, with the ANI being projected as a region with an integral role to play in the same. Better connectivity between the islands and the littorals of the Andaman Sea would in turn improve trade and thus, economic relations—a key aim of the AEP. Likewise, the ANI presents India with a vast canvas for convergence of interests between India and South East Asian nations.

Historically, India's threat perception has forced it to remain pre-occupied with its continental north. This has resulted in it prioritising its land-based interests over maritime opportunity—a view that is possibly apparent in the lack of a more concrete maritime dimension to the AEP. Should there be a standard operating procedure while acting east using the seas, the Andaman and Nicobar must play a central role. That being said, the Indian Navy, in particular, has played a key role in maritime diplomacy and strengthening ties between navies of the South East Asian littoral, with the ANI playing the role of host on multiple occasions. India continues to participate in bilateral and multilateral exercises to improve inter-operability while also promoting the diplomatic dimension of India's regional maritime interests through frequent port visits, operational training and capacity-building, among other things.<sup>8</sup>

Developing strong maritime ties with the South East Asian littorals is key to India playing the role of a net-security provider in the IOR, as envisioned by its most recent naval strategy document titled, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security*

Strategy.<sup>9</sup> This status is perhaps intrinsic in the fact that India enjoys a central position in the IOR and possesses a unique asset such as the ANI so close to the Strait of Malacca that sees over 75,000 container vessels<sup>10</sup>—carrying essential global resources—passing through each year. In line with such a designation, India has been open to improving cooperation with nations involved in the Malacca Strait Patrol (MSP) in order to ensure security of passage between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean<sup>11</sup>.

In addition to tackling non-traditional threats such as maritime terrorism, piracy, drug smuggling, gun running and illegal migration, navies of the countries in the vicinity of the Strait of Malacca are well aware of Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean Region. Furthermore, much has been written about China's presumed hostile activities on Myanmar's Coco Islands and the threats they pose for India and its maritime pre-dominance in the region. Irrespective of the validity of such allegations, India must remain cognizant of all its options. One such option that has been discussed in some detail is that of using the ANI to enforce a naval blockade upon China at the north-western mouth of the Strait of Malacca if and when required.

Thus, the Andaman and Nicobar islands are an apt representation of the convergence between geography, economics and security. Being inextricably linked variables, it is impossible to talk of either of them in complete isolation. With geography favouring India to such a large extent in relation to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it is up to the political leadership to work with the armed forces to capitalise on this good fortune and add further impetus to India's maritime aspirations in and around India's maritime east.

## **The ANI in Transition**

A lot can be learnt about the Andaman and Nicobar islands from its history. Vivid pictures of the complex ethno-cultural and socio-military background of the islands have been drawn up in the past. The islands have come a long way since the Japanese and British occupation during and prior to the 1900s. There was a time during the independence struggle when the ANI was considered to be merely a penal colony for British-deemed outcasts sent in from the mainland. Post 1950, when the islands came under the jurisdiction of the Indian government, they were governed by a policy characterised by 'benign neglect' and 'masterly inactivity'. This, perhaps, formed the basis of the lack of inclusion of the ANI in India's military and economic strategy in the latter half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

The turn of the millennium brought about a shift in strategic thought with regard to the Andaman and Nicobar islands. In 2001, for example, the India set up the Andaman and Nicobar Command at Port Blair, a move that was deemed to be of great strategic value especially in the context of the islands' geographical location. New Delhi seemed taken with the idea of a joint command comprising all three wings of the Indian armed forces, despite opposition from each service.<sup>12</sup> However, the theoretical value of such a move notwithstanding, the ANC was and possibly has continued to remain caught up in matters financial and administrative.<sup>13</sup>

In relative terms, the Andaman and Nicobar islands are currently a much more integral part of India's strategic calculus. It is nearly impossible to talk about India's maritime security architecture in exclusion of the ANI. The islands have gone from being a territory that required assistance to secure itself, to a land of many possibilities that is now a key component of the security apparatus in the region. India has steadily gone about increasing and improving its military assets on the islands in the recent past, in light of traditional as well as non-traditional threats emanating from the sea. China, as discussed, continues to aggressively wade into the maritime realm and the IOR in particular, while non-traditional threats emanating from piracy, maritime terrorism, drug smuggling, gun and running are a constant menace.

Of the total land area of the islands, only about 6 per cent is open to human habitation and development, while only 38 of the 572 islands and islets in the chain are inhabited. Such numbers stand in stark contrast to the fact that the islands comprise 30 percent of India's total EEZ. Such figures not only signify a considerable loss in revenue but also present a security dilemma. It is a known fact that the uninhabited islands, islets and rocks of the ANI pose as safe havens for pirates and illegal migrants from countries such as Bangladesh and Myanmar. However, the non-use of such a large percentage of the land is justified. The Andaman and Nicobar islands boast of vast forest cover and are home to a number of indigenous tribes such as the Jarawas and the Sentinelese that are in dire need of state protection. Governmental measures have, thus, been taken to ensure the autonomy of these tribes and the protection of the forest cover through restricted public access and developmental activities by the government on the islands.

Despite such restraints, the ANI is steadily developing into a seat for economic growth and tourism. There has been talk of transforming the islands into a trans-shipment hub, much like Singapore, to attract greater sea-based container traffic.<sup>14</sup> With greater traffic comes a bigger need for security. The onus would fall upon the

ANC and its various assets for constant patrols and security provisions along the Six Degree Channel, the Ten Degree Channel as well as the Preparis Channel, north of the Andaman's. India has taken steps in the right direction with upgradations to its airstrips and ports, deployment of key naval and air assets, and the launch of its very own floating dock for ship-building and repairs, among other things.

However, for the ANI to truly become a global hub for trade and trans-shipment, India must focus on issues such as inter-island connectivity and civilian infrastructure. Such moves would further generate jobs and promote tourism and, thus, bring about a rise in revenue. With India accepting Japanese investment on the islands, the economic stakes have only risen. For a comprehensive understanding of the logistics and planning that go into improving inter-island connectivity, it would do India good to initiate conversations with island states such as Indonesia and Fiji, for instance. Indonesia's model for inter-island connectivity, in particular, although not directly applicable, should provide a sound base for development. An improvement in this respect would enable the ANI to establish itself as a prime tourist destination. This would only further concretise the security imperative of the ANC.

## **Conclusion**

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has witnessed the resurgence of India's maritime legacy, with the ANI having played and continuing to play an integral role in the larger scheme of things. The islands are no longer limited to playing the role of an outpost on India's eastern territorial frontier. Today, they represent a platform for the nation to extend its strategic frontiers and achieve its aspirations of becoming a blue economy. They offer the nation a wide range of military strategic options by virtue of its geographical location and traits, so as to secure its trade and EEZs, and maintain its pre-eminence in the IOR. However, there is much left to do in terms of fulfilling its potential as an economic and military asset. There is a growing need for improved inter-island connectivity, civilian infrastructure and further military assets on the islands, amongst pre-requisites to protect and preserve the environment and its indigenous inhabitants. While this is certainly a dilemma no state would like to face, it is not that development and environment protection need to be mutually exclusive. Nevertheless, India seems to be gradually heading in the right direction in terms of utilising the islands for its strategic gain while attempting to remain cognizant of any environmental ramifications. The ANI is truly a unique point of convergence between geography, security and economics that India must strive to further develop and capitalise upon.

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