

Lakshadweep Islands: From Fragility to Stability

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Date: 31 May 2018

With a total land area of just 32 km², the Lakshadweep Islands, which lie off the west coast of India, are the smallest of the Union Territories (UT) under the Government of the India (GoI). And yet, they contribute something like 20,000 sq.km to the area of India's Territorial Sea, and 400,000 km² to the country's Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). New Delhi, which seeks to be a flag bearer and the "net-security provider" within the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), perceives Lakshadweep Islands as a crucial maritime bastion from which to progress its naval imperatives, as also to counter the escalating asymmetric threats emanating from its western seaboard. This notwithstanding, most Indian scholars have tended to focus closer attention to the geopolitical significance of the Andaman and Nicobar (A&N) Islands, on India's eastern seaboard. The Lakshadweep group (which includes Minicoy Island) has been afforded far less attention. There is, as a consequence, a relative paucity of academic literature on this island chain. Against the background of this relative-paucity of adequate information, a number of basic questions persist in the minds of the lay public: What is strategic importance of the Lakshadweep Islands? How do they help in shaping India's maritime strategy, given contemporary conflictual patterns within the IOR? In what ways can the islands be leveraged for military advantage?.... and so on.

The Union Territory of Lakshadweep (UTL) is an archipelago of 36 islands that are located some 400 km to the west of the Indian state of Kerala and offers 400,000 sq.km of Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) to the country. Despite its ecologically fragile character and the degrading biodiversity, the primary factor that provides Lakshadweep military significance is its potential in terms of safeguarding India's western seaboard. Its geographic proximity to IOR littoral states such as the

Maldives and Sri Lanka further enhances its criticality. The UTL has attained even greater significance in the wake of the November 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai, which revealed the easy accessibility and consequent vulnerability of India's west coast to terrorist organisations possessing even a modicum of maritime capacity and capability. There have been unconfirmed reports that malevolent non-State State-sponsored actors such as the [Lashkar-e-Toiba \(LeT\)](#) planned to utilise one or more islands of the Lakshadweep group as a base from which they attacks on mainland India could be launched. This could well have been based upon an appreciation by the LeT that Lakshadweep, with its predominant Muslim demographic composition (belonging to the Shafi school of thought) offered easy pickings. The increase of radical [Islamic activities](#) in the Indian state of Kerala, which shares linguistic, cultural and religious affiliations with Indian citizens residing in the Lakshadweep group, has raised security-concerns over the possibility of this religious radicalisation proliferating to the islands. The apparent vulnerability of Maldives, as seen from the rise of radical Islam in that country, coupled with the [inclusion](#) of Kerala in the revised "Red Corridor" that maps the wide swathe of Naxal influence, is a further cause of concern. Until recently, inadequacies in terms of connectivity of the islands with the Indian mainland also contributed to the islanders' feeling of isolation from the Indian polity, and their susceptibility to focussed influence from other quarters. Fortunately, the provision of telecommunication facilities has reduced, if not eliminated, this 'insulation' of the islands. The downside of this is that the likelihood of 'online radicalization' has increased.

Somali piracy is another threat that has, in the past, manifested itself in the vicinity of the islands. This has necessitated an intensification of the security of the Sea Lanes of Communication (SLOCs), which, amongst other measures, includes the setting-up of a sophisticated system of coastal security and surveillance focussed upon the Eight Degree Channel. This Channel, which separates Minicoy Island from the Maldives, witnesses the daily passage of considerable seaborne traffic. In 2012, the IN operationalised a naval base — [INS Dweeprakshak](#) — on Kavaratti Island. In addition, three naval detachments (NAVDETs) are also being functioning, one each in the islands of Minicoy, Kavaratti and Androth. In addition, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) maintains a [District Headquarters \(CGHQ-12\)](#) in Kavaratti, the capital of the UTL. The Navy also recognizes the need to elevate the region to a strategic outpost and a forward operating base, and infrastructure-development is guided by

the dynamics of the maritime template in and around the UTL. A fourth NAVDET is likely to come up in Bitra Island. Of the 36 islands of the UTL, only 11 are inhabited. However, the securitization of the uninhabited islands, too, is becoming a priority due to the emanating asymmetric threats from within the maritime space.

The Indian Navy currently has strong regional interfaces with counter-piracy structures and measures being undertaken by other organisational structures, such as the European Union's Op ATLANTA and the Combined Maritime Forces organised by the USA. The EU's coordination structure for the dissemination of information related to national and multinational anti-piracy efforts is the [Shared Awareness and Deconfliction \(SHADE\)](#). [The Indian Navy, is a member of SHADE, as are other individual navies \(such as those of China\), and, navies that constitute the Combined Maritime Forces \(CMF\)](#). Thus, SHADE offers options for the Indian Navy (IN) to enhance its cooperation with the US Navy, the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN), European Union Naval Forces (EUNAVFOR), and the Japan Maritime Self Defense Force (JMSDF), all of whom share similar concerns in terms of protecting the International Shipping Lanes off Somalia and the north-east coast of Africa.

On another level, the rising presence of extra-regional powers, particularly China, creates a need for greater vigilance and maritime surveillance off the country's western coast. Beijing's galloping interests in the IOR, which are evident from its increasing naval presence, as also from the recent establishment of China's first overseas military base in Djibouti, lends additional urgency to the need for a reconfiguration in India's military approach to Kavaratti. The geographic position of this island offers the navy with a better outreach in terms of naval patrolling and surveillance across the Western Indian Ocean. As such, it can be used to great advantage to enhance the IN's power-projection capabilities.

The island territory, as a whole, periodically witnesses a variety of security drills. Exemplifying this is the coastal security exercise, ['SAGAR KAVACH'](#), whose latest edition was conducted over three-days off the coasts of Lakshadweep, Kerala and Mahé, from 24 to 26 April 2018. It was focussed upon reviewing and enhancing the operational readiness of the various stakeholders involved, so as to better tackle seaborne threats. The UTL also hosts other coastal security exercises, such as like [Exercise GEMINI](#) and the half-yearly [NEPTUNE series](#), which focus on the recalibration of the entire coastal security mechanism. Furthermore, the Coastal

Security Scheme (CSS) launched in 2005 by the GoI incorporates the Lakshadweep Islands within its scope. The CSS seeks to enhance the prowess of the Marine Police force, through infrastructure-development and capacity-building and capability-enhancement. The nature of the region also throws up the possibility of community-involvement as being the best line of defence against maritime-security challenges. One such option that seems feasible is to replicate the model obtaining in the state of Kerala, by establishing “[Kadalora Jagratha Samithis](#)” ([Coastal Awareness Committees](#)) in the Lakshadweep Islands, as a defensive mechanism based upon community-participation in matters such as the reporting of unidentified boats, maritime crimes, or any other threat to coastal security.

Finally, there is a good chance that the Lakshadweep Islands will be adversely impacted by the devastating effects of climate change and its geographic repercussions. Considering the rising seawater level, the island might even be history, in the long run. Hence, when viewed over a larger timespan, it might even be argued that the ongoing militarisation of the region is a vain endeavour. This notwithstanding, as long as the IOR as a whole remains unaffected, the geopolitical changes in this maritime space calls for more investment in terms of ‘military capital’ in the islands, so as to ensure that India prospers within a stable security calculus. There is no doubting the fact that in a geopolitically unpredictable IOR, the Lakshadweep group of islands are a geostrategic asset for India.

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