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An Expert Explains: The strategic importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands

The new thrust on developing strategic infrastructure, both civilian and military, on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is decades overdue. Here's what needs to be done, how, and why

Written by Biswajit Dasgupta
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A view of the Andaman island (Express Archive Photo)

The transformation of India's Look East policy into a robust Act East policy, a realisation of the critical importance of ocean power, and the rapid enhancement in the capabilities of the Chinese PLA Navy, have brought a degree of seriousness to the imperative of developing Indian island territories in general, and the Andaman and Nicobar group in particular.

The **recent thrust on developing strategic infrastructure**, both civilian and military, on the islands is welcome — and decades overdue. The neglect of this strategic island group betrays a lack of strategic maritime vision in the decades since Independence.

What is the strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands?

The islands are located 700 nautical miles (1,300 km) southeast of the Indian mainland. The Malacca Strait, the main waterway that connects the Indian Ocean to the Pacific, is less than a day's steaming from Port Blair.

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Sabang in Indonesia is 90 nautical miles southeast of Indira Point (on Great Nicobar island), and Coco Island (Myanmar) is barely 18 nautical miles from the northernmost tip of the Andamans. Should Thailand build the **Kra Canal** connecting the Gulf of Thailand with the Andaman Sea, its mouth would be about 350 nautical miles east of Port Blair.

The islands share four of India's international maritime zone delimitations with Myanmar, Thailand, Indonesia, and Bangladesh. They also give India substantial ocean space under the United Nations Conference on the Laws of the Sea (UNCLOS) in terms of exclusive economic zone and continental shelf.



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In the foreseeable future, a serious challenge could emanate from a build-up of Chinese maritime forces at the eastern choke points of the Indo-Pacific, namely the Malacca (between Sumatra and the Malay peninsula), Sunda (between Java and Sumatra), Lombok (between Bali and Lombok), and Ombai-Wetar (off [East Timor](#)) straits.

The A&N Islands should be the first line of offence against any attempt from the East to undermine India's maritime security. While some effort was made to leverage this locational advantage with the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) being constituted as a tri-services command in 2001, subsequent efforts have been grossly inadequate.

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Why has the pace of developing strategic infrastructure in A&N been slow?

First, it is fairly recently that political decision-makers have realised that the islands are strategically critical for India's security. The reasons behind the realisation include the unprecedented expansion of the PLA Navy.

Second, the distance from the mainland and difficulties of developing infrastructure have been used as an excuse to delay and stall various projects.

Third, complex procedures for obtaining environmental clearances even for small projects have been a dampener. Regulations on the conservation of forests and native tribes have complicated issues of land acquisition.

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Fourth, the development of islands and strategic infrastructure is a multi-dimensional project involving several ministries, departments, and agencies, that presents significant coordination challenges.

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Finally, the conflict between a long-term strategic vision and immediate political gains has often tilted in favour of the latter.

What should strategic infrastructure development in these islands focus on?

The first requirement of maritime security is to keep the vast area around the islands under surveillance. The security of all 836 islands, both inhabited and uninhabited, must be ensured against attempts at their occupation or use by entities engaged in unlawful activities.

Second, a strong element of deterrence must be ensured against any naval misadventure from the East.

Third, infrastructure that can bolster India's maritime economy must be built on the southern group of islands that is strategically located vis-à-vis the main shipping lane from the Indian Ocean to South East Asia.

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Fourth, ease of travel to and between the islands is key. Without rapid movement of people and goods, the pace of development will remain slow. Improved transportation will help to create and sustain the tourism potential of the islands.

Fifth, the islands' dependence on mainland support, whether in respect of foodstuffs or relevant local industries that support maintenance, repair, and other services, must be reduced to the extent possible.

And what kind of infrastructure should be prioritised on the islands?

● The islands stretch 420 nautical miles (777 km) from north to south. This sea area needs to be monitored and patrolled by aircraft and surface platforms. Separate airfields with long runways that can operate Boeing 737-sized aircraft are essential.

● Ports and fuel storages must be built in both the northern and southern groups of the islands for ships' operational turnaround without the need to return to Port Blair.

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● The Army, Navy, and Air Force must not only commit more forces, but station the right mix of assets at the ANC. The presence of troops must match the requirement to keep the islands sanitised at all times. There is a need to ultimately base surveillance and fighter aircraft there, and frequent detachments must operate in the interim.

● Work on the Galathea Bay (Great Nicobar Island) transshipment port must be expedited. Maritime services such as repair and logistics must be developed for international and Indian shipping.

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● Road networks, high-speed inter-island ferry services, and a seaplane terminal must be developed.

● The pace of development must be enhanced by sourcing suitable material from abroad, utilising international expertise on creating marine infrastructure, and using components that can withstand the weather and possible seismic shocks.

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● Forest and environmental clearances must be accorded with minimum red tape. The concessions for defence infrastructure allowed along India's northern borders must be extended to the A&N Islands.

● Planned habitation of uninhabited islands should be considered by providing incentives such as free or subsidised land, where eco-friendly entrepreneurial efforts could be encouraged.

● India could also explore the possibility of leveraging international arrangements in the Indo-Pacific such as the Quad and the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) to catalyse development

efforts on the islands.

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