The Growing Strategic Importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands

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Key Points

- As the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific increases, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, located in the Bay of Bengal, will attain increased strategic significance.

- The Andaman and Nicobar chain of islands could be used as a basis for Indian maritime power projection into the Indo-Pacific and even beyond into the south-west Pacific.

- The Andaman and Nicobar Islands could be used for India’s Third Fleet and the trans-shipment hub at Car Nicobar, the northernmost island in the chain, could potentially be a strategic game changer, rivalling the ports of Singapore or Colombo.

- India, Japan and the United States could also install sonar surveillance systems in the islands to track Chinese submarines in the Indian Ocean. Australia might also choose to take part in such an arrangement.

Summary

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are attaining increased strategic significance. Located at the juncture of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, the group of 572 islands (thirty-seven of which are inhabited), straddles some of the busiest trade routes in the world and spans 450 nautical miles in a roughly north-south configuration adjacent to the western entrance to the Malacca Strait, which is, itself, a major Indian Ocean chokepoint.
Geopolitically, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands connect South Asia with South-East Asia. While the northernmost point of the archipelago is only 22 nautical miles from Myanmar, the southernmost point, Indira Point, is a mere 90 nautical miles from Indonesia. The islands dominate the Bay of Bengal, the Six Degree and the Ten Degree Channels that more than sixty thousand commercial vessels traverse each year. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands constitute just 0.2 per cent of India’s landmass but provide thirty per cent of its Exclusive Economic Zone.

Analysis

Located as it is, the island chain acts as a physical barrier that secures busy Sea Lines of Communications by creating a series of chokepoints: The Preparis Channel in the north, the Ten Degree Channel between the Andaman and Nicobar island groups and the Six Degree Channel to the south. While the first two sea lanes are used infrequently by commercial shipping, all vessels that pass through the Malacca Strait must traverse the Six Degree Channel.
Geostrategically, because the islands are located 1,500 kilometres from the mainland, they help to connect India to the Indo-Pacific. Their strategic significance was noted by the Indian Ministry of Defence when it created India’s sole joint command post there in October 2001.¹

**Role in Indian Maritime Strategy**

India’s maritime security strategy paper, which was released in January 2016, rightly emphasised the strategic significance of the islands and underlined their importance as a basis for Indian power projection into the Western Pacific and beyond.²

India is expected to exploit the military potential of the islands by taking following actions:


2. Placing a ship-based nuclear missile system there as a deterrent measure.³

India will likely deploy, furthermore, electronic sensors to enable the automatic identification of vessels and long range identification and tracking systems, together with human and technical intelligence capabilities, which would enable network-centric operations to be conducted from the islands. This will give India real time data fusion capabilities as well as assisting the region through identification operations with seamless connectivity.

At present, India’s efforts to deal with Chinese assertiveness in the Indo-Pacific rest with its Eastern Fleet, which is based in the eastern mainland port of Visakhapatnam. That arrangement is likely to change with the growing infrastructure on the islands, which could eventually host a permanent fleet.

Should that transpire, it would give New Delhi the capability to track, control or deny Chinese maritime operations in the Indian Ocean, thus making the islands a vital component of India’s sea denial strategy.

India’s maritime strategy emphasises sea denial and sea control. Naval warfare theory posits that a navy could dominate an adversary by controlling the littoral seas or denying their use to that adversary. Sea control is the strategy of choice for an ascendant force but requires a higher number of assets in order to dictate terms in littoral spaces over prolonged periods. In contrast, a weaker force focusses all its combat efforts in denying the adversary the use of the near-seas; a strategy of “sea denial” that is akin to an anti-access and area-denial strategy. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands offer excellent potential to enable such a strategy.

India will likely construct the necessary infrastructure on the islands to create the right environment for an anti-access and area-denial maritime exclusion zone in the event of a conflict. It would probably be able to host routine visits by the Indian Navy’s current and future aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines. It could also be the base for elements of the Army’s Special Forces and Naval Commandos, the “Marcos”, an SU-30 MKI all-weather fighter squadron and a maritime Jaguar squadron on a permanent basis.

India could, additionally, choose to offer training areas and the use of the airfields to the United States, Australia, New Zealand, Japan and some South-East Asian countries.

Interestingly, the security strategy document referred to previously emphasises the importance of sea control and sea denial as operational requirements. India’s sea denial strategy is predominantly oriented towards the importance of denying Beijing’s South China Sea Fleet an operational domain in the Indian Ocean. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands will assist that strategy by further contributing to the Indian Navy’s maritime predominance in the eastern Indian Ocean region and its influence beyond the Malacca Strait in conjunction with a range of countries, including Indonesia, Australia, Vietnam and the United States.

In sum, it could be argued that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will provide the basis of India’s maritime thrust into the western Pacific and beyond.

**Andaman and Nicobar as India’s Third Fleet Option**

The Indian Navy is expected to increase the strength of the existing Eastern Fleet stationed at Vishakhapatnam and to create another one in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. It would, thus, need to increase the number of available vessels by roughly 40 per cent, from 137 to about 200. By 2027, a re-orientation towards a three-fleet bluewater navy with flexible command will be the way forward. It is anticipated that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands would become the Far Eastern Naval Command and distinct from the two existing commands.

Further, the creation of a transhipment hub on the island of Car Nicobar could be an economic and strategic game changer, with the potential to rival the ports of Singapore or Colombo. The hub could also facilitate future naval co-operation between the Indian Navy and other maritime powers in the Indo-Pacific such as Australia, Japan and the United States.

Such co-operation could pave the way for increasing India’s maritime engagement, and give it the ability to reach across South-East Asia to the South-West Pacific and, possibly, beyond. So far, India has no permanent military presence in the Pacific, but that may not be out of the question in the years ahead.

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To be sure, the above arrangement would enable the Eastern Fleet to undertake sea denial and sea control tasks. Indian maritime strategy could eventually involve having a permanent bluewater naval presence in both the western and eastern theatres of the Indian Ocean.

On that note, a Third Fleet option in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will help to facilitate better co-operation between that Fleet – the future Far Eastern Fleet – and the US Seventh Fleet and the Australian Western Fleet, stationed near Perth.

**India’s Present Military Strength in the Islands**

As Andaman and Nicobar is the only Tri-Command structure overseen by the Integrated Defence Staff, the military strength at present is evenly distributed among the three services, despite the fact that the Indian Navy’s stake runs deeper. Further, the unified scope of a Tri-Command Service further facilitates co-operation with other powers in the Indo-Pacific, such as Japan, Australia and the United States, including the possibility for more joint exercises.

India’s military commitment and present force postures are predominately continental in nature and are focussed on dealing with two nuclear-armed adversaries – Pakistan and China – along its northern borders. At present, India’s military infrastructure on the islands is more limited and consists of two full length airstrips at Car Nicobar, which is an air force base, and at Port Blair, a naval base, and two shorter airstrips at Diglipur in the North Andamans and Campbell Bay on Great Nicobar Island. The harbours at Port Blair and Mayabander in the Andaman chain, and Nancowry in the Nicobars, offer natural harbours. The deep Nancowry Harbour is located in the south of the island chain with the islands of Karmota and Nancowry to either side.

**Sound Surveillance Sensors Chain**

Apart from converting the Andaman and Nicobar Islands into a military base, it is expected that India will undertake joint projects with Japan and the United States to install sound surveillance sensors (SOSUS) in the vicinity of the islands. This is an important element of controlling the Indian Ocean operation of China’s South China Sea Fleet and to monitor its activities. Australia could join in the installation of the sound sensors as this will also help Australia in projecting its influence in the Indian Ocean and, in so doing, to aid in tracking the movements of Chinese submarines in the wider Indo-Pacific region.5

The co-operation between India, the United States and Japan in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands may not stop with the installation of acoustic systems and it is expected that a joint project collaboration on laying an undersea optical fibre communications cable from Chennai to Port Blair could eventuate. Once completed, this network is likely to be integrated with the existing US-Japan “Fish Hook” network that was created specifically to monitor People’s Liberation Army-Navy submarine activity in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean Rim.

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The starting point for the above collaboration is believed to have been Prime Minister Narendra Modi’s visit to Washington 2015, when India and the United States agreed to intensify their maritime security co-operation. New Delhi is said to have decided to move forward with its plans to strengthen its near-seas defences after the defence ministers of the Association of South-East Asian Nations collectively stated their desire for India to play a security role beyond the Indian Ocean at the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus gathering in Langkawi, Malaysia, in March 2016.

Although there is no official confirmation of the above developments, it is entirely possible that China’s anti-access/area denial (A2/AD) plans in South-East Asia may have served as the catalyst for an Indian response in the Bay of Bengal.

It is suspected that Beijing was in the process of creating an undersea “Great Wall” in the South China Sea by establishing an array of ocean-floor acoustic sensors to detect US submarines. China’s hydrophone system is reportedly modelled on the US Navy’s SOSUS system that was originally installed to track Soviet submarines in the mid-1950s during the Cold War.

Reports that the Chinese Navy is on the verge of operationalising its sensor chain may have prompted New Delhi to pursue its own undersea sensor project in the South Asian littoral. Those developments could prompt Australian policymakers to join with India, Japan and the United States in a collaborative partnership.

In the next five to ten years, it is expected that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will be added as the third fleet of the Indian Navy the Far Eastern Naval Command, in turn under the overall command of the Tri-Command Service, thus ensuring its flexibility. That arrangement could easily be the face of India’s expanding role as a net security provider in the greater Indo-Pacific region.

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