

Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India's Strategic Vision: Prospects and Challenges for Development

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Abstract

Recognising the strategic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI), India is expanding its developmental efforts in the archipelago. This research offers a descriptive examination of India's intertwined military and civilian infrastructure build-up in the ANI. It also explores the growing appeal of the islands to various international stakeholders due to their strategic importance for maritime security. The research highlights India's collaboration with Japan and the United States (US) in infrastructure development and defence cooperation at ANI. With support from Japan, India is establishing power plants and surveillance systems in the ANI. The US has also leveraged the ANI as a strategic hub to provide logistical support for its naval operations in the Indo-Pacific Region, aiming to counter China's growing influence. However, these developmental efforts face significant challenges, including environmental risks, navigational complexities posed by the Ten Degree Channel, and concerns from local communities. This research concludes that India's ability to leverage the strategic potential of the ANI depends on balancing developmental pursuits in the archipelago with environmental sustainability.

Keywords: Andaman and Nicobar Islands, Indian Ocean Region, Indo-Pacific, Strategic Development, India.

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Introduction

The ANI, an archipelago consisting of 572 islands, holds paramount significance in the strategic, economic, and security landscape of the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The archipelago is located at the crossroads of major maritime trade routes. The geographic location of the island chain provides India with strategic leverage, offering a critical vantage point over nearby maritime traffic. In particular, the north-south configuration of the islands makes it a vital force multiplier. Moreover, it is located near a critical chokepoint – the Malacca Strait. The ANI allows India to monitor the Malacca Strait and project its military power in the Indo-Pacific. The strait is important because ships heading to China pass through it, and around 80% of China's oil imports transit via Malacca (Hetter & Hunter, 2014). Additionally, New Delhi can conduct supply and reconnaissance missions from the islands. This fact underscores the significance of the ANI in India's strategic calculus.

While the ANI has historically been viewed as India's maritime outpost, the archipelago is now drawing increased attention from foreign powers like Japan and the US due to the intensifying competition in the Indo-Pacific. Economic engagement, maritime security, and counterbalancing China's growing influence in the Indo-Pacific are the primary factors driving foreign interest in the ANI. Japan and the US are seeking to deepen their collaboration with India in the ANI through various projects and development initiatives. As major powers vie for more influence in the region, the strategic use of the ANI has emerged as a key determinant of India's geopolitical positioning.

Despite possessing immense strategic potential, developmental efforts in the ANI face significant challenges, including environmental risks, navigational complexities posed by the Ten Degree Channel, and concerns from locals. Environmental risks include frequent earthquakes and the negative impacts of infrastructure development on the islands' rich flora and fauna. Navigational complexities stem from the intricacies posed by the Ten Degree Channel, which bifurcates the ANI and affects naval access and control. Local communities have expressed concerns about the environmental consequences of ongoing developmental pursuits. This article is divided into three main sections to help readers understand the opportunities and challenges associated with the development of the ANI. The first section closely examines India's military and civilian infrastructure build-up projects in the archipelago. In light of increasing infrastructure development, the following section discusses the growing interest of international players in the islands. The third and final section of the article focuses on the challenges facing the development and militarisation of the islands.

Literature Review

Mohan and Wagle, in "Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Andaman: India Ends the Neglect of the Strategic Island Chain" (Mohan & Wagle, 2019) analysed the visit made by the Prime Minister of India to the ANI in December 2018 in terms of its

strategic significance for India. The Indian authorities have focused on the tourism and trade potential of the islands. In addition, the Indian government is looking to develop the islands by enhancing infrastructure, improving the security architecture, and revamping connectivity in the region. The authors discussed several initiatives launched by the Indian leadership, such as the renaming of the islands within ANI, the establishment of the Andaman and Nicobar Island Development Agency, building security alliances with Japan and Singapore, and investing in the enhancement of India's naval capabilities in the region.

Mishra and Saha, in "The Strategic Significance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Assessing Anti-Access Area Denial Potential in the Bay of Bengal" (Mishra & Saha, 2022), provide an overview of the importance of the ANI in the context of India's increasing military prowess in the Bay of Bengal. The authors argue that historically, New Delhi has underestimated its naval potential in the region, and they emphasise that India requires a strategic approach given its geographic location in the IOR. This location offers India an opportunity to use the ANI as a bargaining chip against China and to reinstate itself as a significant naval power in the IOR. The authors also advocated India's cooperation with Japan to enhance digital connectivity and modernise the ANI infrastructure.

In "Neglected Maritime Terrain in the Bay of Bengal: An Examination of the Future of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands" (Phillips, 2022), the author argues the geostrategic importance of the ANI and the underutilised oceanic space in the surrounding region. The article highlights expeditionary advanced base operations in the ANI, bilateral maritime exercises, and combined naval enforcement activities. The author further argues that the islands may be used to curb unlawful piracy and unreported, unregulated fishing, as well as to protect transnational shipping across the Malacca Strait. Therefore, expeditionary advanced base operations could serve as a platform for enhanced cooperation between India and the US.

Basu, Bose, and Chaudhury, in the article "Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Facilitating India's Connectivity in the Bay of Bengal" (Basu, Bose, & Chaudhury, 2019), highlight the strategic relevance of the ANI in improving the connectivity of India in the Bay of Bengal. The article mentioned the historical context of these islands and highlighted the unique challenge of balancing developmental opportunities with environment specific limitations. By focusing on the islands' potential and natural resources, the article positions the ANI as a critical component enhancing India's connectivity, strategic partnership, and response for humanitarian aid and disaster relief operations.

Das, in "Securing the Andaman and Nicobar Islands" (Das, 2011), also argues in favour of the strategic significance of the ANI in addressing India's security concerns. The author highlights several obstacles that hinder the security of the islands, including underdeveloped infrastructure, poor communication networks, and inadequate surveillance capabilities. The article correctly identifies the important role the islands can play in boosting the Indian economy by facilitating transportation,

supporting tourism and the fishing industries, and promoting sustainable development. The article also advocates recognising the ANI as a significant strategic asset for New Delhi in light of India's 'Look East' policy and the broader dynamics of regional geopolitics.

The existing literature predominantly focuses on the strategic importance of the ANI, stressing the necessity of enhancing its infrastructure. Academic writings on this topic underscore the islands' strategic value and, to a limited extent, address the environmental impacts of development efforts. However, there is a noticeable lack of exploration in the ongoing development projects on these islands. Notably absent is a scholarly analysis regarding the progress of both civilian and military infrastructure development in the region. This gap in the literature underscores the importance of thoroughly investigating India's military and civilian infrastructure initiatives in the ANI. To address this gap, this study employs a descriptive research methodology to shed light on the intertwined development of military and civilian infrastructure in the region.

Military Infrastructure Development

Over time, New Delhi has recognised the untapped strategic potential of ANI. As part of India's maritime security strategy, ANI serves as a critical line of defence, particularly amid China's growing naval foothold in the IOR. The significance of these islands for India can be gauged by the fact that it has established the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), which stands as the sole tri-service theatre command within the Indian Armed Forces (IAF) (Pandit, 2015). The strong presence of its armed forces in the ANI is perhaps necessary for New Delhi to proclaim itself as the net security provider in the IOR and to assert its status as a formidable naval force in the Indo-Pacific region (Pant & Bose, 2023). Currently, India's priority is to enhance the infrastructure of the islands. The Indian government is investing in the island's defence and development sectors. The development of military infrastructure in these islands is crucial for India to safeguard critical shipping lanes and prevent any potential blockade.

To strengthen the military presence in the region, the Indian government passed an exclusive 5,650 crore rupee budget in 2019 for the military infrastructure development plan of the ANI (Pant & Bose, 2023). The ongoing ten-year plan aims to station military personnel, aircraft, missiles, additional naval vessels, and drones on the islands. In addition to its military infrastructure development plan, New Delhi also seeks to increase the strength of its armed forces stationed on the islands by 2027 (Pant & Bose, 2023). To strengthen its naval aviation capabilities in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI), India has established a network of strategically located naval air stations. These include INS Kohassa at Shibpur, INS Utkrosh at Port Blair, and INS Baaz at Campbell Bay. INS Kohassa at the Naval Air Station of Shibpur was commissioned into the Indian Naval Force in January 2019 (The Times of India, 2019). The airfield at INS Kohassa has been developed to serve a dual purpose, catering to both military and civilian aviation needs.

Considering the significance of airpower in bolstering maritime surveillance and operational reach, India is seeking to extend the runways of its naval air stations in the ANI to 10,000 feet, as longer runways enable the operation of larger aircraft (The Economic Times, 2023). It is working to extend the runway of INS Kohassa to 10,000 feet (The Times of India, 2019). The runway at the naval air station INS Baaz was already upgraded by 860 feet in 2021 (AMTI, 2022). In January 2023, the Defence Minister of India, Rajnath Singh, also visited Campbell Bay and reviewed the progress of the upgrade (NDTV, 2023). Moreover, the construction of a new 10,000-foot runway at the naval forward operating base INS Kardip at Kamorta Island is under consideration (Pandit, 2019). These new runways will play a crucial role for India in hosting military aircraft. Once these extended runways become functional, the IN will be able to operate its P-81 aircraft to carry out its critical maritime operations in the region (Singh A. , 2023).

Furthermore, the Indian government is now building a massive naval base on the Great Nicobar Islands (Global Order 2023). The main purpose of constructing this base is to check China's activities and prevent Beijing from further stretching its influence in the Indian Ocean. India can potentially use this naval base to counterbalance China, as the ocean is critical for China's energy security. In addition to military infrastructure development, India is also actively deploying military assets in the ANI to reinforce its strategic posture and achieve 'information dominance' over the Malacca Strait in the Indian Ocean. It has already deployed the Sukhoi-30MKIs fighter aircraft, Poseidon-8I maritime patrol aircraft, and Heron-II surveillance drones in the ANI. The deployment of Su-30 MKI fighter aircraft at INS Baaz enhances India's position in the Indo-Pacific, allowing it to project its military power deep into Southeast Asia and beyond (Gupta, 2023). Furthermore, the planned deployment of Dornier-228 patrol aircraft and Mi-17 V5 helicopters in the archipelago will further augment India's reconnaissance and rapid response capabilities by enhancing operational readiness in the region (Pandit, 2019).

Civilian Infrastructure Development

Along with the development of military infrastructure, civilian infrastructure is critical for the economic growth of the ANI, and it also serves as a key element of India's broader strategic vision. New Delhi is seeking to strengthen civilian infrastructure in the archipelago to bolster its economic self-sufficiency and strategic security. In this regard, the Indian government has introduced one of the most significant initiatives in the ANI, titled "Holistic Development of Great Nicobar Island." The National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog) envisioned this mega-infrastructure project, worth Rs. 72,000 crores, at the southern tip of the ANI (Devasahayam, 2023). The project includes the establishment of an International Container Transshipment Port; the construction of the Great Nicobar Island International Airport (GNIIA), a power plant, and a Greenfield township on more than 160 square km of land (Sekhsaria, 2023).

The establishment of an international container transshipment Port worth Rs. 48,000 crore, at Galathea Bay along the south eastern coast of Great Nicobar Island is a significant part of this initiative (Mishra T. , 2023). The port infrastructure development is planned to occur in four phases from 2028 to 2058. The first phase costs Rs. 18,000 crore, is set to conclude in 2028, is designed to handle 4 million containers per year (Mishra A. , 2023). The proposed mega terminal has a natural depth of 18-20 meters – more than that of Singapore and Colombo (Simhan, 2019). Moreover, it will offer a 400-metre-wide navigation channel, one of the largest in the region (Mishra A. , 2023). In addition, it will include seven berths (The Tribune India, 2023). Upon completion, the port will be able to manage 16 million containers annually. The port will rival major shipping hubs - including Singapore and Colombo – and help end India's dependence on Southeast Asia and Sri Lanka. Currently, over 80% of India's transhipped cargo enters the country through Colombo and Southeast Asia, costing New Delhi over 200 million dollars annually (Gupta P. , 2023). Hence, the project envisions turning the ANI into an economic and strategic hub, solidifying India's maritime presence in the Andaman Sea and Southeast Asia.

Beyond maritime infrastructure development, energy security is also a key priority in the ANI. To achieve this goal, the formation of the Andaman and Nicobar Renewable Energy Development Agency (ANREDA) has been approved by the ANI administration (Andaman Gov, n.d.). Under the Vision 2030 plan for ANI's development, the island administration aims to increase renewable energy deployment by promoting green and tapping into various renewable energy sources. These endeavours include using solar, wind, tides, biomass, ocean energy, and more to ensure the region's energy security. In parallel, the administration of the ANI is also seeking to expedite industrial development as part of its strategy to attain comprehensive economic growth across the archipelago. In cooperation with the concerned ministries and departments, the economic growth of the islands is planned through the development of micro, small, and medium enterprises, along with the promotion of tourism, food processing (coconut and marine-based), and the Information Technology (IT) industry.

Beyond ports and industry, the development of digital infrastructure has emerged as a key pillar of ANI's strategic development. On August 10, 2020, the Indian Prime Minister ceremonially launched the inaugural submarine optical fibre cable project for ANI (Dalmia, 2024). The 1,200-crore project enabled the laying of 2,300 km of submarine optical fibre cable connecting the islands with mainland India, enhancing telecom and broadband connectivity. Previously, a satellite connection, characterised by limited bandwidth and significant latency, linked the islands to the Indian mainland. The project aims to boost the socio-economic development and tourism of the islands. The fibre network is expected to serve a wide range of services, including online education, tourism, banking operations, shopping, and telemedicine. However, in addition to assisting communication, it will also enhance security, especially during natural disasters or failures of other systems. This step towards

digitising the islands holds immense strategic significance, especially from a geopolitical perspective—at a time when the presence of Chinese ships has been increasing in the Bay of Bengal. The optical fibre cable connection will fulfil the strategic communication needs of the Indian military. Thus, the optical fibre cable is not just a digital bridge connecting the islands to the Indian mainland; it holds immense strategic and governance significance.

Foreign Interests in the ANI

Recognising the strategic significance of ANI, various foreign countries have started to show increased interest in the archipelago. Japan, being a key player in the Indo-Pacific, has collaborated with the Indian government through the Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) on different projects in ANI. Similarly, for the US, the ANI can serve as a critical hub for naval operations in the region as competition in the Indo-Pacific intensifies. The increasing competition among powerful countries seeking to dominate the Indo-Pacific ensures that ANI will become a core maritime and partnership hub in the world, shaping regional geopolitics.

Japan's Interests

Tokyo has been actively contributing to local infrastructure projects in the ANI, as its aspirations in the Indo-Pacific align with India's views on a Free and Open Indo-Pacific (FOIP) (Bose, 2022). The JICA has collaborated with the government of India to upgrade the civilian infrastructure of the islands. As part of this collaboration, Japan is establishing a 15-megawatt diesel power plant on South Andaman Island. Previously, India signed an agreement worth US\$133 million with JICA for a renewable energy-based power supply project in the ANI, aimed at reducing the islands' carbon footprint (Narang, 2022).

However, Indo-Japanese cooperation in the ANI has not remained limited to infrastructure and energy; strategic and defence cooperation has also gained momentum. Recently, Japan has sought to expand its partnership with India in the ANI by proposing the integration into the Sound Surveillance System (SOSUS) network (V, 2022). SOSUS, first developed by the US, provides deep-water long-range detection capability for tracking submarines by identifying their obscure acoustic signals. By joining the US-Japan fishhook “Sound Surveillance Sensors Chain,” India could potentially improve its ability to monitor the Chinese submarine movements in and around the Andaman and the South China Sea (Aneja, 2023).

The United States' Interests

With the intensification of strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, the ANI is emerging as a focal point of interest for competing powers. The US requires logistical support from India for its naval assets operating within the Indo-Pacific. In this regard, the ANI archipelago holds promising potential to serve as a key logistical support hub for US naval assets. In 2020, the US Navy used India's ANI for logistical support when

a strategic base in the region facilitated the refuelling of the P-8 Poseidon – its long-range anti-submarine warfare and maritime surveillance aircraft (Sharma, 2023). This situation exemplifies how these islands, due to their geostrategic location, can help the US increase its operational flexibility in the Indo-Pacific.

Moreover, the Indo-US Strategic Partnership would benefit from potential joint military cooperation in the ANI in addressing the growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean. In this regard, the US Indo-Pacific Command (INDOPACOM) could potentially partner with India in the ANI to lay the foundation for enhanced operational capabilities (Raja, 2019). The US INDOPACOM and India's Andaman Nicobar Command (ANC) could jointly form a formidable military presence in the IOR. This collaboration would help counter China's increasing foothold in the IOR and deter rising challenges in the Indo-Pacific. Additionally, given the islands' proximity to the Strait of Malacca, they can pose a significant threat to China. India and the US can strategically use this threat factor to their advantage in their geopolitical calculations. Much of the maritime traffic bound to or from the Malacca Strait must pass near the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. In this regard, India could consider adopting a 'metal chain' strategy for sea denial, with the help of the US (Holmes, 2019). In the event of any conflict with China, India and the US could seek to capitalise on the ANI's position to their advantage in the Indian Ocean.

Challenges

The government of India is keen on achieving the overarching goal of capitalising on the ANI's location advantage for geo-economic and geostrategic purposes. However, there are many concerns regarding extensive infrastructure development and increasing tourism in a region of ecological significance and geographical complexity. Environmentalists contend that the developmental process on ecologically delicate islands can result in a massive loss of biodiversity (Singh A. , 2022). As development projects generally entail the mass cutting of forests, the reduction in tree cover will bring about changes in the island ecosystems, along with increased runoff and sedimentation in the ocean, which will also impact the coral reefs in the region. Moreover, many environmentalists have raised concerns about the loss of mangroves on the islands because of the development process. The Indian government's Great Nicobar Project may cause a loss of over 9.64 lakh trees (Koshy, 2023).

Furthermore, the unique geo-ecological settings of the ANI place it within a dense disaster probability envelope. Due to their location in the geologically vulnerable Alpine-Himalayan belts classified under seismic zone V, the islands are highly prone to frequent earthquakes (Kapoor, 2021). For instance, in 2004, the ANI witnessed one of the worst tsunamis, causing unforeseen damage to life and property in the region. (Andharia, Ramesh, & Dhiman, 2023). Climate change further exacerbates this vulnerability, making the island territory susceptible to additional environmental challenges such as tropical cyclones, storm surges, tsunamis, sea-level rise, coastal

erosion, and habitat destruction. Another potential strategic challenge to the development of the ANI is the “Ten Degree Channel,” a 150 km-wide water strip that bifurcates the ANI (Gupta J. , 2015). This channel can potentially pose geographical complications for India in maintaining naval access and control. Hypothetically, if a hostile power develops influence and control in the Ten Degree Channel, it could deprive India of naval access to the union territory (Phillips, 2022). Moreover, China has already been increasing its activities near the Ten Degree Channel and the archipelago. If Indian concerns materialise and China further increases its presence around the Ten Degree Channel, it could pose a great challenge to India's strategic and developmental ambitions in the ANI.

In addition, the grievances of the local population are also a challenge to the development of the ANI. The people of the archipelago have not completely assimilated with those of mainland India because of their lack of geographic proximity. Five indigenous groups, namely the Great Andamanese, the Jarawas, the Onges, the Shompens, and the North Sentinelese, inhabit the islands (Sekhsaria, 2017). These vulnerable indigenous tribes live in Strait Island, Middle and South Andaman, Little Andaman, Nicobar Islands, and North Sentinel Island. The indigenous people of these islands depend on natural resources for their survival. Developmental endeavours in the region have the potential to negatively affect the delicate ecological equilibrium of the region, potentially detrimentally affect the delicate ecological equilibrium, thereby negatively impacting the local communities and the indigenous populations (Rita & Ramachandran, 2023).

Therefore, they have apprehensions and reservations about increased development and tourism in the islands. For instance, in November 2018, an American tourist illegally visited North Sentinel Island. The Sentinelese people killed him by attacking with arrows (BBC, 2018). This suggests that the apprehensions of the indigenous population regarding external interference and development can present a significant challenge to the development of the ANI. Hence, it is imperative for the Indian government to strike a balance between competing demands, facilitating the advancement of the islands while mitigating the risk of significant environmental degradation. The ANI administration should strengthen the basic capacities and systems of the islands to deal with climate change challenges effectively. Moreover, it should aim to develop ANI as an eco-friendly tourist destination by promoting sustainable tourism – one that contributes to economic growth without disturbing the indigenous population or upsetting the ecological balance of the territory.

Conclusion

ANI holds immense strategic significance in regional geopolitics. India's efforts to benefit the strategic potential of these islands will determine its regional position. India's development of naval bases and access points across ANI is indicative of how far India is willing to protect its interests in an increasingly hostile geopolitical environment. In parallel, foreign powers are also expressing interest in collaborating

with India to maximise the strategic potential of these islands. Moreover, the archipelago could potentially be an asset for the US as the Indo-US Strategic Partnership deepens. In the evolving Indo-Pacific security landscape, ANI has the potential to play a crucial role in countering the influence of China in the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, the development of these islands is fraught with multiple challenges. Frequent earthquakes pose environmental risks to ANI, potentially hindering the development of infrastructure. Furthermore, it is important to protect the delicate ecosystem of the islands' flora and fauna. India won't be able to strengthen its position in the archipelago otherwise. The geographical complexity, particularly the Ten Degree Channel dividing the islands, poses a concrete challenge regarding naval access and control. Moreover, acknowledging local communities' concerns is essential for India to execute successful strategic initiatives in the archipelago. Although there are several obstacles regarding the development of these islands, a reasonable approach that involves consideration of the environmental issues and respect for the people who reside on the lands can aid New Delhi in attaining its strategic goals in the Indian Ocean Region and beyond.

Disclosure Statement

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