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India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Growing Regional Significance

By Nazia Hussain

Synopsis

As China expands its maritime reach in the Indian Ocean, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands off the coast of India have gone high up on the priority list for New Delhi's defence policy. The Modi government should develop a plan of action to tap the security and economic potential of the islands.

Commentary

LOCATED AT the juncture of the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, a group of 572 islands (of which only 37 are inhabited)—the Andaman and Nicobar Island chain—straddles the busiest trade routes in the world, spanning 450 nautical miles and sits strategically at the entrance of the Malacca Straits. Although administered by India, these islands have greater proximity to Southeast Asia—Myanmar, Indonesia and Thailand—than to the Indian mainland.

This geographical distance from the mainland has long been a reason for New Delhi to neglect the islands, treating it only as a distant sentinel outpost. With increasing Chinese naval presence in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), New Delhi is finally waking up to the strategic geopolitical value of the islands. Not only does the proximity of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to the Malacca Strait place them in a strategic position with regard to surveillance of crucial Sea Lines of Communication, they could also form the cornerstone for India's "Act East" policy and its maritime security strategy.

New Delhi's Mistaken Lack of Interest in Islands

Yet, despite their obvious geostrategic significance, New Delhi has not done much to

develop the islands as a viable security and economic asset – until lately. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands host India’s first and only tri-service command—the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC)—with the Army, Navy and Air Force serving under a unified command. However, more than a decade has passed since the ANC was established in 2001 and it still remains plagued by turf wars, fund crunches, and faces bureaucratic red tape.

With increasing Chinese naval footprint in the IOR and the acknowledgement that the Islands are crucial to India’s “Act East” Policy, New Delhi has finally decided to upgrade the meagre ANC and beef up military capabilities and infrastructure needed to monitor the vital Sea Lines of Communication. India’s Navy chief Admiral RK Dhowan recently described the Andaman and Nicobar Islands as a “very, very important aspect” of India’s security.

Earlier this year, India deployed two of its most advanced maritime patrol/ anti-submarine warfare aircraft in the archipelago. According to Indian defence officials, the deployment comes as a response to frequent incursions by Chinese conventional and nuclear submarines in the IOR.

‘String of Pearls’ More than Theory

Policy hawks in New Delhi do go by the “String of Pearls” theory—that China will try to expand its naval presence along the Indian Ocean periphery. It is no surprise that New Delhi is greatly concerned about the growing PLAN footprint in the Indian Ocean. To this end, India has held talks with the United States on enhancing cooperation on anti-submarine warfare to keep track of the growing number of Chinese submarines spotted on the Indian Ocean.

About a third of India’s Exclusive Economic Zone lies around the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, providing tremendous economic potential for tourism, fisheries, forests and hydrocarbon. The Modi government has drawn up an ambitious plan to transform the archipelago into the country’s first maritime hub, pushing for infrastructure needed to boost the tourism potential of the islands’ limestone caves and mud volcanoes while still ensuring protection of the original Jarawa inhabitants.

To complement New Delhi’s policy, the Andaman and Nicobar administration has plans for direct air links to Southeast Asia, an undersea cable to improve communications and plans to declare Port Blair as a Free Trade Area.

Regional Implications

Considering the strategic location of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India needs to think of them as more than just a distant listening post in the larger IOR. Instead New Delhi should aim to utilise the islands’ proximity to major trade and shipping centres like Singapore, which is only 950 kms from the capital Port Blair, as well as Yangon and Phuket which are even closer.

Myanmar is the only ASEAN nation to share land borders with India; the two countries also share a long maritime boundary in the Andaman Sea and the Bay of Bengal. Earlier this year, the navies of the two countries signed an agreement to

facilitate coordinated maritime patrols on the islands. Now with the NLD in power and a fresh start after the removal of sanctions, Myanmar should look into joint exploration with India of possible hydro-carbon potential in the Andaman Sea basin.

Playing out its “Act East” policy, India has been building greater engagement with the maritime littorals—Japan and Australia - searching for energy off the coast of Vietnam, engaging regional navies in Southeast Asia in joint naval exercises, and working to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

New Delhi has also for the first time allowed for foreign investment in the archipelago, signalling a policy shift. The Modi government has been open to collaborate on upgrading civilian infrastructure on the islands with Japan—the first project being discussed is a 15-megawatt diesel power plant on South Andaman Island. A spokesperson from the Japanese Embassy in India said that Japan was eager to use official development assistance to enhance India’s “connectivity” with countries that are members of ASEAN or SAARC.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands extend into the vital sea lanes connecting Japan and the Middle East, through which much of Japan’s energy, oil and gas imports pass. So it is in Japan’s interest to invest on these islands in order to ensure trouble free entry to the Malacca Straits and securing the shipping lanes in the Indian Ocean. With the tension with China over the Senkaku Islands straining trade and economic ties between the two countries, Japan has been increasingly redirecting FDI towards India.

Japan is not the only country interested in getting an entry into the archipelago. India and the US have earlier this year agreed in principle to share military logistics, which might mean hosting US troops at its bases or American ships being allowed to make port calls in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the future.

With the little-noticed policy change under the Modi government towards beefing up security and infrastructure in the archipelago and forming strategic defence partnerships, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are set to become increasingly visible on Asia’s maritime landscape.

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