



Andaman & Nicobar Islands: Policy of Masterly Inactivity and Benign Neglect to Proactive Development

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By leveraging the potential of Andaman & Nicobar Islands, Government of India aims to transform these Islands as an economic hub and one of the key centres of India's defence and security strategy. The archipelago is now being increasingly seen as a tool to connect South and South East Asia and to enhance India's maritime influence in the eastern Indian Ocean region.

The commissioning of the Naval Air Station (NAS) as INS Kohassa by Chief of the Naval Staff, Admiral Sunil Lanba, on 24 January 2019 is a significant step towards strengthening India's maritime capabilities in the eastern Indian Ocean Region (IOR). The INS Kohassa's strategic location, viz., the proximity to Coco Islands and its vicinity to critical sea lane of communications and choke points, make it a critical asset for the Indian Navy. The INS Kohassa and other air bases in the Andaman & Nicobar Command will not only compliment Indian Navy's role as a security provider in the Indian Ocean, but will also raise the ability of Andaman & Nicobar Command's to carry out non-traditional security cooperation as well respond quickly in situations of emergency. During the commissioning ceremony, Admiral Lanba explicitly mentioned that the recently developed Naval Air Station would be utilized for both military and civil purposes.

Map: Andaman & Nicobar Islands



Source: <https://www.beautifulworld.com/asia/india/andaman-islands/>

Strategically located, Andaman & Nicobar Islands, larger than several island countries, are an asset in India's defence and strategic calculus. Recent years have been witness to the "policy of proactive development"¹ in this archipelago, instead of what has been described as the old policy of "Masterly Inactivity" and "Benign Neglect"². By leveraging the potential of these islands, the Government of India aims to transform these Islands as an economic hub and one of the key centres of India's defence and security strategy.

The growing influence of China in the Indian Ocean and its subsequent impact on the balance of power in the eastern IOR, the trans oceanic shift from the Atlantic to Indo-Pacific, proximity to the Malacca Straits which is one of the busiest ocean trade routes, and the Indian Navy's pursuit of an energised role in the IOR is transforming Andaman & Nicobar Islands as an integral component of national security and development strategy. The Andaman & Nicobar Islands are comparatively more distant from the Indian mainland than some South East Asian countries. Myanmar is just 22 nautical miles away from its northern most part, while Indonesia is only 90 nautical miles away from southern most point of the archipelago and even the Malacca straits are not far from the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. This archipelago is being increasingly seen as a bridge to connect South and South East Asia and to enhance India's maritime influence in the eastern Indian Ocean region.

It is not the first time that Andaman & Nicobar Islands has served as a springboard for connectivity to South East Asia. In the 11th century, Rajendra Chola, the great king of the Chola dynasty, occupied the Andman & Nicobar Islands, and used them as strategic naval base to enhance Chola influence in South East Asia. Till the 17th centuries, these islands were not

¹Kaul, Sanat Andaman and Nicobar Islands India's Untapped Strategic Assets, 2014, https://idsa.in/system/files/book/book_andman-nicobar.pdf, Accessed on 16 February 2019.

² Ibid.

colonised, although over the period 1755 to 1851, the Danes made some unsuccessful attempts to settle in the Nicobar Islands.

In the search of permanent naval base in the Bay of Bengal, British started to control some islands in the late 18th century. But later, the British idea of a permanent naval base lost its momentum, and instead of being "platform of power projection" the islands became a bleak penal colony for the British.³ The British Government decided to use Port Blair as penal settlement for its Asian and African prisoners. A penal settlement was also developed at Nancowry⁴ by the British Government in 1869 which lasted only for 19 years.⁵ Japan occupied the Andaman & Nicobar Islands from the British for more than three years (1942-45) till the end of World War II. During the Japanese occupation Indian National Army (INA) in the leadership of Subhash Chandra Bose enjoyed nominal control over Islands. Despite Indian control over the Islands after 15 August 1947, the British Royal Air Force (RAF) maintained a Staging Post with an airfield at Car Nicobar till 1956.

The view of the Andaman as a dark, bleak prison island lingered in the post independence period. Unfortunately, in the post-Independence period, special administrative structures for the islands, a colonial legacy, also did not permit full exploitation of the island's potential. The famous Indian naval strategist, diplomat and academician K M Panikkar had argued, "the defence of the long and open Indian coastline not to speak of the active control of the Ocean, is possible only by having suitable island cover as advanced bases. The possession of the Andamans and Nicobar gives protection to the East coast and secures adequate control of the Bay of Bengal."⁶ A major change in the policy of Masterly Inactivity and Benign Neglect appeared in 2001, when India set up a Tri-service command in Andaman & Nicobar. Since then the Government of India has slowly but incessantly moved towards the development of military and non-military infrastructure at the archipelago.

In recent years, New Delhi has taken some effective measures to leverage the geo-strategic potential of these islands. In 2015, The Government of India announced a Rs 10,000 crore plan to transform the Andaman and Nicobar Islands into a maritime hub.⁷ An expanded dry dock, ship repair industry in the capital Port Blair, as well as ways to protect aboriginal tribe Jarawa while promoting tourism industry, are mentioned in the blueprint of the plan.⁸ On 10 August 2018, Niti Ayog unveiled a proposal for holistic development of Andaman, Nicobar and Lakshadweep

³ C Raja Mohan, Raja Mandala: New ripples in Andaman Sea, 2018, *Indian Express*, <https://indianexpress.com/article/opinion/columns/narendra-modi-singapore-visit-look-east-policy-shangri-la-dialogue-andaman-sea-5443200/>, Accessed on 16 February 2019.

⁴ Nancowry is an island, situated in the central part of the Nicobar Island chain.

⁵ Sanat Kaul, Andaman and Nicobar Islands India's Untapped Strategic Assets, 2014 https://idsa.in/system/files/book/book_andman-nicobar.pdf, Accessed on 16 February 2019.

⁶ C Raja Mohan, *Samundra Manthan: Sino India Rivalry in the Indo- Pacific*, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, D.C., 2012, p.179.

⁷ Modi government's Rs 10,000 crore plan to transform Andaman and Nicobar islands, 2015, *Times of India*, <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/modi-governments-rs-10000-crore-plan-to-transform-andaman-and-nicobar-islands/articleshow/49111067.cms>, Accessed on 11 February 2019.

⁸ Ibid.

islands. To enhance regional trade, there is a plan to build a transshipment terminal at Campbell Bay (just 90 km away from Malacca Strait), and to boost regional air connectivity. Beside strategic benefits, a transshipment terminal at Campbell Bay will create better trade opportunities with South East Asian countries, particularly with Indonesia, Malaysia and Singapore.

The increasing participation of regional navies and extra regional navies in the bilateral and multilateral naval exercises in the Andaman Sea reflects the urge for fostering cooperation among friendly navies to tackle the common security concerns in and around the water of the Andaman Sea. The naval exercise Milan was first held in the Andaman Sea in 1995 with the participation of only five navies. In the recent 10th edition of the exercise in 2018, participation had increased up to 16. India and Indonesia launched the inaugural edition of a bilateral naval exercise named Samudra Shakti in Java Sea (not far from the Andaman Sea). The Indian and Indonesian navies have also been commencing Coordinated Patrols (CORPAT) on the respective sides of their "international maritime boundaries twice a year since 2002."⁹

There is a plan to build connectivity between Andaman Nicobar and Aceh (Indonesia) to unleash the economic potentials of both areas.¹⁰ The joint statement issued during PM Narendra Modi's visit to Indonesia on 30 May 2018, underlined the importance of stronger sea links between the two countries to enhance cooperation and people to people contacts.¹¹

The recent efforts by the government to accelerate the development of civilian as well as military infrastructure in the Andaman & Nicobar Islands must be appreciated. But, it is not enough as the geopolitical importance of the Indo-Pacific is increasing and as China is looking forward to further its presence in the Indian Ocean region, it is important for India to speed up the agenda to transform the military and non-military infrastructure of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands to secure its economic, security and strategic interests.

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Disclaimer: The views expressed are that of the Researcher and not of the Council.

⁹ Coordinated Patrol and India-Indonesia Bilateral Maritime Exercise commence at Belawan, Indonesia, *Indian Navy*, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/coordinated-patrol-and-india-indonesia-bilateral-maritime-exercise-commence-belawan>, Accessed on 19 February 2019.

¹⁰ India-Indonesia Joint Statement during visit of Prime Minister to Indonesia (May 30, 2018), <https://www.mea.gov.in/bilateral-documents.htm?dtl/29932/IndiaIndonesia+Joint+Statement+during+visit+of+Prime+Minister+to+Indonesia+May+30+2018>, Accessed on 19 February 2019.

¹¹ Ibid.