

**Strategic Significance Of Andaman And Nicobar Islands****Dr. Kailash Chandra Joshi****Associate Professor****PG Department of Geography****JNRM****Port Blair****Andaman And Nicobar Islands****(Received:10December2023/Revised:28December2023/Accepted:10January2024/Published:20January2024)****Abstract**

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands with her sun soaked and pristine beaches, incredible corals and marine life, an intriguing colonial past and the remnants of a stone age culture is not just a major tourist attraction but a paradise for strategic planners. The location of these islands, deep in the Bay of Bengal provide invaluable strategic reach over the South East Asia region and the Straits of Malacca and Sunda, therefore, providing a significant strategic and security dimension.

**Introduction**

Andaman and Nicobar Islands are the most strategically located island chains in the world and it has a unique significance and strategic importance. The Andaman and Nicobar group of islands, include more than 300 islands and 206 rocks, rocky outcrops and islets, are latitudinally situated between 6°45'N to 13°41'N and longitudinally 92°12'E to 93°57'E. The total geographical area is 8249 km<sup>2</sup> with a coastline of 1962km.

The continental shelf is only 1600km as the sea around the islands is deep from within a short distance of the shore. The total area of the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) of India being 2.015 million km, nearly 30% of this lies in the region of Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Similarly, about 25% of the coastline of India is found around these islands.

All these islands are volcanic origin, forming peaks of a long range of submerged mountains extending from Burma to Sumatra. Most of these islands being oceanic are picturesque and still display relatively undisturbed nature as its best. They have fringing coral reefs on the eastern side and barrier reefs on the western side. Coastal areas harbour a rich population of coral and shell with a luxuriant growth of mangrove vegetation on the islands.

Proximity to the equator and to the sea, ensure a hot, humid and uniform climate with day temperature around 30°C. Since these islands are under the influence of both south west and north east monsoon, it rains through May to February but for a short break in October. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have a unique tropical ecosystem with a wide range of diversities of a genetic nature in germo plasm and great natural beauty. The Andaman archipelago is home of four Negro

tribes-the Great Andamanese, the Jarawa, the Onge and the Senthelese while the Nicobar group of islands are home of two tribes of Indo Mangloid origin –the Shompen and the Nicobarese.

### **Strategic Significance**

The location of Andaman and Nicobar Islands are critical for India’s strategic interest. These islands comprise the sole archipelago in the Bay of Bengal and they sit astride important sea channels. These islands are located much closer to the countries of south east Asia then they are to the Indian mainland. The Landfall Island situated at the northern most tip of the island chain is 20 km away from Myanmar’s Coco Island and the southernmost tip is 80 km from Sumatra in Indonesia. Port Blair, the capital, is about 668 km away from the coast of Thailand.

Beyond just the physical proximity, the geographical layout of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands also endows it with the potential to play a vital role in ascertaining maritime security in the region, especially in terms of maintaining freedom of navigation. This is because the Andaman and Nicobar Islands straddles the Preparis channel, the Duncan passage, the Ten degree channel and the six degree channel, all of which are important shipping route for India as well as other shipping destined for east and south east Asia.

In recent years, China’s efforts to expand its footprint in the Indian Ocean region to over its Malacca dilemma and fulfil its maritime Silk Road ambition have fuelled apprehensions about freedom of navigation in these waters. Consequently, the countries around and the global powers have sought to engage in security collaborations to ensure free movement. Referring to the combined geographical expanse of the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the Indo-Pacific is essentially a geostrategic realm of opportunities and challenges. For India, it stretches “from the shores of Africa to that of Americas,” as declared by Prime Minister Narendra Modi at the Shangri La Dialogue in 2018. ‘ASEAN centrality’ lies at the heart of India’s conception of the Indo-Pacific and therefore, strengthening ties with the countries of Southeast Asia defines its Indo-Pacific aspirations and forms the basis of its ‘Act East’ and ‘Neighbourhood First’ policies (Bose & Chaudhury, 2021).

### **Various Strategic Steps Undertaken**

Due to growing presence of the Chinese threat in the Indian ocean, the Government of India has put its sincere efforts to protect and develop these islands from foreign illegal presence.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have long been deemed suitable for the establishment of a transshipment port as it provides the advantage of a deep draft capable of accommodating mainline container vessels. In August,2020, the Government announced plans to develop a transshipment port at Campbell Bay in Great Nicobar(Bose & Ray,2021) which is very near to the main sea route between the South China sea and the Indian ocean.

To mitigate the security threat posed in the region, the Ministry of Defense established a single Tri-service command in 2001 to take advantage of the strategic location as well as to counter the security threat to India and these islands. The important functions being served by the Andaman and Nicobar command includes control over vital global shipping routes, control over shipping chokepoints, QUAD force multiplier, historic and contemporary geostrategic soft and hard power, port development led encirclement and protection of exclusive economic zone etc(Bose & Ray,2021).

The tri-service has progressively emerged as a lynchpin of India's regional maritime engagement in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman sea. Various multilateral and bilateral maritime engagement viz. The Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Co-operation(BIMSTEC), the MILAN series of exercises, coordinated patrols and bilateral exercises with nearby states in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman sea have contributed to this purpose along with regional maritime force. While regional navies of south east Asian countries have been making regular port calls to Port Blair, other major navies of USA, Australian, Japanese and French etc have also shown interest in visiting the Andaman Islands for port call and exercises.

Andaman and Nicobar Islands provides an appropriate opportunity for joint power projection in the Indian ocean region. With already established airstrips in some of these islands and suitable beaching grounds, these islands provides a perfect nodal center for human assistance and disaster relief operations. Considering the geographical proximity to the countries in the region, nonstop UAV operations can be planned to obtained all time maritime domain awareness. If the contribution can be stepped further, these islands can be used to stage Indian and US nuclear weapons to provide an umbrella against the Chinese aggressive posture towards countries in the region(Singh,2021). Most recently, in 2020, the Chennai-Andaman and Nicobar undersea internet cable was inaugurated to provide high-speed internet connection to seven remote islands of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands chain—i.e., Swaraj Dweep (Havelock), Little Andaman, Car Nicobar, Kamorta, Great Nicobar, Long Island, and Rangat. This will also facilitate trading and tourism on the islands. If the geographic significance of the islands is to be converted to strategic utility, development must percolate into all aspects of its administration. To do so and, consequently, to leverage the proximity of the island chain with Southeast Asia, India has entered into a number of ventures in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

### **Conclusion**

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands have immense strategic value and these could be used as a springboard for engagement of the eastern neighbourhood i.e. ASEAN countries . This would

also facilitate building political trust and reinforcing economic ties. Diplomacy and confidence building would foster security bonds with the maritime neighbours to jointly combat common threats including illegal migration emanates from littoral countries. It is clear that these islands are poised to play a major role in India's look east policy because of their strategic location.

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