



Mains Practice Question

Q. As a rising China projects its economic and military power into the Indian Ocean, any strategy for regional balance by the government in India would necessarily involve the economic and military development of the Andaman & Nicobar Islands. Examine. (250 words)

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Approach:

- Briefly explain Andaman and Nicobar Islands' location and significance.
- Connect the significance of the islands to its geopolitical location. Explain its significance for the trade and security.
- Suggest measures to be taken for its military and economic development.
- Conclude by linking its importance to India's Act East and Neighbourhood First policy.

Introduction

- The geostrategic position of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands makes them central to any Indian response to rising Chinese influence in the Indian Ocean Region as China has made great advances on its path to military superiority and control over the trade route via waters in the South China Sea and via land through the One Belt One Road initiative.
- India could be using these islands to project power into the region and signal China's People's Liberation Army Navy about its readiness to counter any intervention.
- It can become a platform for power projection and fortifying the Andaman-Nicobar Islands can be the first step toward a more robust Indian Ocean strategy.

Body

The Significance of the Islands

- **Doorway to Southeast Asia:**
 - The northernmost part of the archipelago is only 22 nautical miles away from Myanmar.
 - The southernmost point, called the Indira Point, is 90 nautical miles from Indonesia. The islands are significant as balancing Chinese dominance would involve considerable cooperation between India and its major strategic partners.
- **Trade and Security:**
 - These islands dominate the Bay of Bengal and the Six Degree and Ten Degree channels through which more than 60,000 commercial vessels traverse each year.
 - Among the nine major bottlenecks that control entry to this region are the Malacca Strait and the Six Degree Channel. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands lie in this strategically important zone, and India with its growing naval capabilities could play a significant role in controlling access.
 - India can deploy naval assets to the islands for surveillance in important sea lines of communication.
- **Maintaining the regional balance:**
 - From these islands, India can create a maritime exclusion zone in the event of a conflict with China. Development of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands can counter the presence of

People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) surface combatants, aircraft carrier, or nuclear attack submarines

- Bolstering India's defense infrastructure on the islands would send a strong message that India intends to remain the leading power in the Indian Ocean.
- The ability to monitor Chinese maritime activity in the IOR would allow India to acquire valuable information about the nature of Chinese operations in the IOR, such as operational patterns.

▪ **Economic significance:**

- Unrestricted and widest possible access to the Indian Ocean and the Andaman Sea can widen the possibility of resource exploitation of minerals rich islands. Moreover, foreign warships and vessels can be restricted access to the strategically significant region. It can balance Chinese hold on ports in Pakistan, Sri Lanka and countries from Horn of Africa and its string of pearls policy.
- Developing undersea cable link between India's mainland and the islands can improve internet connectivity which can further strengthen its connectivity with the mainland.
- Infrastructural development like road building, airstrip construction, and the building of jetties can help link North with South and can promote economic activities like tourism in the region.

Economic and Military Development

- The Ministry of Tourism is developing the Coastal Circuit (Long Island-Ross Smith Island- Neil Island- Havelock Island- Baratang Island-Port Blair) in Andaman & Nicobar under the Coastal thematic circuit of Swadesh Darshan Scheme for development of island tourism in the country.
- The government is planning to bring seaplanes under the regional connectivity scheme, UDAN-3. This would boost tourism in the area connecting it to the mainland as well as to the other islands.
- With a view to creating a model for the integration of three defense services, the government has permanently stationed fighter jets and other combat platforms on the islands strengthening the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC).

Conclusion

- India should make Andaman and Nicobar Islands an important element of its "Act East Policy" and "Neighborhood First" initiative. Islands Development Agency should be strengthened and robust policy framed it can be promoted, which develops the island territories with an eye to India's larger geopolitical interests.