



Integrating the Island

(This editorial is based on the article “Integrating the island” which appeared in Indian Express on 2nd January 2019.)

Prime Ministers of India rarely traveled to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Indira Gandhi and Rajiv Gandhi visited in 1984 and 1986 respectively, and Manmohan Singh went there in early 2005 to review the tsunami relief operations.

[The Prime Minister’s recent visit to the islands](#) is only the fourth over the last many decades. PM’s visit will hopefully begin to change India’s national narrative on the Andamans.

By virtue of this change in outlook, the islands have figured more vividly in geopolitical discourse than ever before. Prior to this shift in thought, the islands were considered to be more of a liability in India’s security apparatus than an integral component of its larger national strategy.

Historical Importance

- Prime Minister’s decision to time his visit with the 75th anniversary of Subhas Chandra Bose flying the tricolor in Port Blair has helped highlight the role of Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India’s freedom struggle.
- The focus on Bose inevitably draws attention to the fragmented response of the national movement to the Second World War. The Indian National Congress, led by Mahatma Gandhi, refused to support the British war effort and opposed the mobilization of Indian resources to defeat the Axis powers.
- The Communist Party of India, which initially declared the Second World War as an “inter-imperialist war”, chose to actively support the war effort when Nazi Germany invaded Soviet Russia in 1941.
- Bose, in contrast, chose to align with Berlin and Tokyo to fight the British colonial rule. His Azad Hind government in Port Blair was founded on imperial Japan’s occupation of the Andaman Islands.
- Japan’s support for Bose was part of Tokyo’s mobilization of Asian nationalism against European colonial powers.
- The story of Bose, Japan, and the Azad Hind government underlines the enduring geopolitical significance of the Andaman Island chain and its waters. In the 17th and 18th centuries, the islands were the site of contestation between European colonial powers — Portugal, the Netherlands, France, and Britain. After the Napoleonic wars in Europe, the Indian Ocean turned into a British Lake through the 19th century.

Strategic Importance

- Accounting for 30 percent of India’s Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) in the Bay of Bengal have been acknowledged as a distinctive strategic asset in the 21st century.
- **Now labeled the ‘unsinkable aircraft carrier’, the islands provide India with a**

springboard to expand its strategic frontiers to its maritime east.

- The critical location of the Great Nicobar Island which gives us a tremendous advantage over Straits of Malacca, a Sea Lane of Communication (SLOC) critical to trade and movement of oil from Gulf to the South China Sea, East China Sea and the Pacific.
- **The two archipelagos consisting of 572 islands, islets and rocks that form a chain gives India its strategic and economic importance in the Bay of Bengal as well as in the Indo-Pacific region.**
- These islands also provide India with tremendous economic potential for tourism, fisheries, forests and enable India to add about 30% of its additional Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) post UNCLOS III of 1982 which will bring future benefits from undersea mining and potential oil and gas.

Geographical Salience: Linking Security and Economics

- **The ANI's geographical orientation is perhaps its most standout characteristic.** Located in close proximity to the busiest maritime chokepoint in the world and possessing a vast North-South spread spanning about 800 kilometers, it provides India with a range of security-related and economic options.
- **Traffic passing in and out of the Strait of Malacca routinely circumvent Great Nicobar and enter the 200-kilometer-wide Six Degree Channel, while a smaller portion uses the Ten Degree Channel that separates the Andaman Islands from those of Nicobar.**
- Such geographical traits and their subsequent economic payoffs provide India with a platform and the impetus to maintain a certain degree of oversight and domain awareness in order to better secure its interests in the region.
- Island territories provide nations with a variety of possibilities. From a military standpoint, they often serve as a natural fortification against approaching hostile maritime assets while also doubling up as warning and surveillance posts.
- The geographical contiguity of the islands to countries such as Myanmar, Indonesia, and Thailand further cement its strategic versatility.
- **Landfall Island, the northernmost island in the chain is a mere 40 kilometers from the Coco Islands of Myanmar, while Indira Point, near Campbell Bay, is about 165 kilometers from Aceh in Indonesia.**
- Such statistics are especially important in the context of the Act East Policy adopted by India in 2014. For instance, Indonesia's Global Maritime Fulcrum has given it the impetus to intensify its synergy with India in matters maritime, with the ANI being projected as a region with an integral role to play in the same.
- Developing strong maritime ties with the South East Asian littorals is key to India playing the role of a net-security provider in the IOR, as envisioned by its most recent naval strategy document titled, [Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security](#).
- In addition to tackling non-traditional threats such as maritime terrorism, piracy, drug smuggling, gun running, and illegal migration, navies of the countries in the vicinity of the Strait of Malacca are well aware of Chinese forays into the Indian Ocean Region.
- Furthermore, much has been written about China's presumed hostile activities on Myanmar's Coco Islands and the threats they pose for India and its maritime predominance in the region. Irrespective of the validity of such allegations, India must remain cognizant of all its options. (One such option that has been discussed in some detail is that of using the ANI to enforce a naval blockade upon China at the north-western mouth of the Strait of Malacca if and when required.)
- Thus, the Andaman and Nicobar islands are an apt representation of the convergence between geography, economics, and security.
- **Being inextricably linked variables, it is impossible to talk of either of them in complete isolation. With geography favouring India to such a large extent in relation to the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, it is up to the political leadership to work with the armed forces to capitalize on this good fortune and add further impetus to India's maritime aspirations in and around India's maritime east.**

Way Forward

- Ending the deliberate isolation of the island chain and promoting economic development, tighter integration with the mainland, strengthening military infrastructure, regional connectivity and international collaboration. The government has initiated some important steps in that direction,

including on internet connectivity, visa liberalization, tourism, building new ports, agreements for cooperation with neighboring countries in South East Asia.

- **Historically, India's threat perception has forced it to remain preoccupied with its continental north. This has resulted in it prioritizing its land-based interests over maritime opportunity—a view that is possibly apparent in the lack of a more concrete maritime dimension to the AEP.**
- As it tries to turn the outpost in the Andamans into a strategic hub, New Delhi can draw much from the wealth of international experience on the sustainable transformation of fragile island territories.
- Finally, any large-scale development would inevitably raise questions about preserving the pristine environment of the Andamans and protecting its vulnerable indigenous populations.
- **As the government seeks to accelerate economic development and enhance the military potential of the Andamans, there will be many challenges ahead. But none of them are unique to India.**

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