

**Strategic Importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Implications for Pakistan**

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**Abstract**

*The growing strategic importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands is now changing the dynamics of Indian ocean and maritime politics. The sea politics is now has been more tangled than before. Viewed under the theory of offensive realism proposed by John Mearsheimer that holds the concept of power maximization of states and balancing strategies to counter their rival states as all states have some offensive capabilities and countries can never be certain about the intentions of other states. The ultimate goal is to dominate. Within that context, the study aims to examine the growing strategic importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and its future prospects and implications on Pakistan. This paper analyzes the main indicators that India is presently working on, to develop its Tri-service theatre. The study seeks to answer the following questions a) How Andaman and Nicobar Islands are strategically important for India? b) How will the development of the two islands will change the dynamics of maritime politics and tackle increasing Chinese presence in Indian ocean? c) What will be the future implications or Pakistan? The study argues that the ANC is the significant factor for India to aggravate its control in the Indian Ocean region as it is developing its largest military and nuclear build-up. However, it can unleash negative imprints for Pakistan in future in certain aspects.*

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**Key Words:** ANC, The Maritime Politics, Sino-Indian Rivalry, Indian Tri-Service Theater, SLOCS, Bay of Bengal, String of Pearls, Strait of Malacca

**Introduction**

This paper will analyze the development of Andaman and Nicobar Islands and how the development of tri-theater will change the dynamics of maritime politics in context of Indian maritime influence and power. Also this paper will focus on the future implication that can be unleash by the ANC full build-up as in context with Pakistan.

This research is based on secondary data. It is mixed research (Quantitative and Qualitative). This research is analytical as it based on content analysis and then critically evaluated. Also exploratory because it tends to explore the future prospect of transformation the dynamics of maritime politics as buildup of Indian ANC and the what implication will it have on Pakistan. Secondary sources are based on the relevant data taken from published research papers, magazines, articles, journals, newspaper editorials, and other authentic online sources.

The authors in their articles and research paper generally discussed the growing strategic importance of these Islands as they are situated at the choke point, bays and the strait. These islands are integral part of territory of Indian Union. This territory consists of two groups of small islands at the southeastern edge of Bay of Bengal far away from mainland India. These archipelagos are formed by the submerged mountainous range. These islands came into existence due to collision between Indian Plate and Burma Minor Plate (part of Eurasian Plate, similar to formation of Himalaya. Andaman and Nicobar Islands are southward extension of Arakan-Yoma range.

The Islands in the south, form an arc in Indian Ocean Region (IOR) stretching towards south in a vertical line to some 1000km (620 miles) between Myanmar (Burma) and the island of Sumatra, Indonesia. With Port Blair its capital on the South Andaman Island, this arc makes a transition line between Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea.

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As these islands were present on the oldest trade routes between India and Burma, these islands are known to man for quite long. Navy of East India Company (EIC) visited these islands and British also tried to make these islands a prison for convicts. These islands came under British administration in 1872 and later, in 1956 became part of Union territory of republic of India.

In 2004 these islands drew global attention due to the hit taken by tsunami that had caused by the movements of tectonic plate in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) near Indonesia. Divided into North, Middle and South, Andaman comprises of more than 280 islands. Little Andaman, that is situated in the south, is separated by 145 km (90 miles) wide Ten Degree Channel, from the Nicobar Islands.

### Historical Perspective

Historically, maritime powers have used these islands due to their strategic location to strengthen its position, relevance and importance in the IOR and as a major military installment and choke point for adventure towards east. The Chola dynasty, one of the longest and mightiest ruling dynasties of this region, was the one who first tapped into the importance of these island arc. The Chola dynasty being the mightiest in the pages of the South Indian history led by Rajendra Chola, use this strategic location as an anchor point and naval check post for its expansion and adventures towards Southeast Asia. After conquering Sri Lanka, the same navy raided Srivijaya empire through the base in these small strategic islands.

Modern powers have used these islands at one time or other. Andamans were used to advance strategic adventures by west to east and by eastern powers towards west. Britishers were most prominent. They kept strong hold on these islands to keep their assets secure in Indian Ocean Region (IOR). World war saw capture of these islands by Imperial Japan and used these Islands as base to launch attacks on other allies in this region such as Burma and North-East India. Historically, these archipelagos had been important to different powers in overreaching their naval and military presence in the Indian Ocean. The Andaman's are major connecting point bridging the gap of western Pacific Ocean and Indian Ocean Region. It also eagles on one of the heaviest traffic route of sea line of communications (SLOCs) in the world. Furthermore, they are most important strategic chokepoints and trading route for goods traversing the waters of the Indian Ocean to East and Southeast Asia. Located as it is, the island chain acts as a physical barrier that secures busy Sea Lines of Communications by creating a series of chokepoints. The Prepares Channel in the north, the Ten Degree Channel between the Andaman and Nicobar island groups and the Six Degree Channel to the south. While the first two sea lanes are used infrequently by commercial shipping, all vessels that pass through the Malacca Strait must traverse the Six Degree Channel.

## **Literature Gap**

The study tends to fill in the gap about the future implication for Pakistan. No books/articles are available regarding the implications for Pakistan after the complete build-up of Indian tri-theater service. However, a lot of data generally is available on the strategic importance of these islands. An effort has been made to give the future implication for Pakistan and possible recommendations.

## **The Article analyzes the following Parts**

- a) The first part will examine growing strategic importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands for India.
- b) The second part is based on rationalizing the phenomena of ANC that how it is changing the dynamics of maritime politics and tackling Chinese presence.
- c) The third part analyzes the future implications for Pakistan.

## **The Growing Strategic Significance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands**

The geo-strategic and security environment went through mega changings in the lieu of wave of globalization of international arena as an outcome of post-cold war international relations. In this shifting scenario, as per "India's look east policy", the importance of Andaman and Nicobar command shows great strategical ambitions. The ANC provide us glimpse of India's future strategic ambition to secure naval credibility and to be a determinate at least within its surrounding geo-strategic realm. As the contemporary time period is phased as Asia's century and the time of the oceans, so the geopolitical important of ANC cannot be neglected.

Geo-strategically, these archipelagos are found 1,500 kilometers from the terrain India, they help India reach the Indo-Pacific. Their key importance was noted by the Indian Ministry of Defense when it made India's sole joint command post there in October 2001.

"Andaman and Nicobar Islands are very strategically located. They overlook the entire sea lines of communication and choke lines (in Indian Ocean region). The proximity of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands to Malacca Strait makes them very strategic with regard to monitoring of the area and keeping the choke points under surveillance," Navy chief Admiral R K Dhowan said at his annual press conference.

According to this statement it is clear that Andaman and Nicobar Islands are known as extended arms of India are integral part of country's security concerns. Far away from the mainland of India, lies at a good distance in the south part of Bay of Bengal. In north, these archipelagos at only 22 nautical miles lies Myanmar (Burma) and in the southernmost (Indira Point) at 99 nautical miles lies Indonesia.

The Indian Ocean, remained peaceful in all the years of turmoil and is re-emerging as an important theatre for powerful competition and engagements. China being main competitor to secure its interest is expanding its theatrical reach in the IOR and fortifying its ties both economically and strategically with littoral states in the region, India has started to construct a new naval strategy to maintain its giant and decisive posture in the region. While India's major reason to get worried for China's involvement across the Indian Ocean, developments and advancements in the South Asian naval domain are one of major issue.

Owing to its critical presence near the Strait of Malacca, a major choke point of trade towards east, these two islands can significantly change the naval dynamics in this region. While the islands have witnessed a forum for achieving strategic advances and offensive abilities, as of now their actual advantage lies in extending maritime economic domination, consciousness and sustaining a naval advantage, as being done by China in South China sea. In addition to making a plain strategy for the role of these islands in its national strategy. India must also devise new standards to wisely use the abilities of its allied partners in addressing the island's infrastructural backwardness. As India had been ignoring its maritime priorities in the past, the naval domain as in the history gives it an opportunity to make itself as a leading regional actor by use of its wide coast and economic abilities along with military power. These naval developments will make a path for India to deter and counter emerging and dominating China in its neighborhood.

India with its growing economy pace and dreams to be a superpower by every dimension is preparing to ramp up its influence in Indian Ocean. History dictates us some necessities to be a superpower, one of which is naval superiority in the region. ANC provides India a base and region to asserts its naval power across the Bay of Bengal, Other than naval presence, this region is also rich of resources that are needed by fast growing economy.

India with its military base in the southern part of these archipelago is making itself ready to play a role of police officer for energy and oil cargos in the Indian Ocean, like every other power in international arena India is also eyeing for not only expansion of influence but also securing its economy by securing major trade routes. These archipelagos are a cluster of 572 islands that extend in a 720-km long chain, some 1,200 km off the southern and eastern coasts, the military base guards an area that comprises just 0.2% of the country's land mass but is tasked with protecting the 30% of its exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

Specifically, these archipelagos have been present in back seat in new Delhi's strategic and political white paper, specifically given their distance (approximately 1200 kilometers from the mainland). Priorities within the naval hierarchy cornerstone on fortifying India's coastline due to rivalry with Pakistan, while these islands have potential to be used as really strong strategic point in upcoming time. However, current evolution in ocean region of Asia have pushed India to revise its maritime checklist and present government is also putting more efforts in strengthening maritime security.

First step in achieve strategic goals was formation of Andaman and Nicobar Command that forecast a major reshuffling of strategy across the region, by deploying at some stage offensive and defensive capabilities under these commands. The ANC is India's first command to include all three military services under one banner along with coast guard. Its commander and chief come from all three groups of armed forces. The ANC with its coast guard division has played an exemplary role by aiding Tsunami hit areas.

India is maximizing its security capacity in the "strategic important" infrastructure there even they can monitor activities of Chinese Navy in IOR, that can also be used to have aircrafts, ships and submarines. The extension of the nuclear complex and military runway is also one of the significant factors to increase Indian hold in the sea.

### **ANC Changing the Dynamics of the Maritime Politics**

ANC is altering the dynamics of maritime politics as India geared itself to modify its military and nuclear infrastructure presently, based on 30 warships, tanks and small landing crafts, 28 maritime petrol air crafts and huge oil and gas reserves. According to a projection, 75% of Indian segment basin, 720 trillion cube reserves are yet to be discover. one Indian army brigade and 3000 soldiers are deployed in ANC. Which operated 17 helicopters, 28 petrol air crafts and 13 fighter jets. The region is blessed with vast natural resources. Since few decades' Indian ocean region has witnessed a dramatic shift of economic and strategic level leading to rise of new major and regional power possessing immense potential to influence world affairs.

Strait of Malacca, a major choke point and shortest route to connect Indian ocean to pacific region. Most of the naval traffic use this route to move towards south china sea and pacific. So, India started to establish its first and only tri-service theater command set up by the government of Wajpai to ensure operational coordination between army, navy and air force to secure its national interest in the region.

China's ports are about 900km away from one of the air bases of India on the island chain. Which gives SU-30Mk fighter jet of IAF a comfortable to range to carry out mission without need of air refueling. However, a fighter jet taking off from Indian mainland cannot reach to these strategic points without aerial refueling.

India's military priorities can be seen by its armed forces expenditure plan, 55% funded by the army, 23% by the air force and 15% by the naval force. Inconveniences along India's standard boundaries, including conflicts with neighbors such as China and Pakistan, have maintained the nation's defense strategy focused around its northern boundaries since autonomy. Critically located close the Strait of Malacca, these islands could substantially alter the Indo-Pacific maritime dynamics. While the islands were expected as a stage for hostile skills, their basic benefit today lies in enabling the awareness of the ocean region and maintaining a maritime leeway for India and its associates.

Since independence, problems along with India's mainland boundaries, adding conflicts with China and Pakistan, have held the country's defense focused on its northern boundaries. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands, critically located close the Malacca Strait, could considerably change the Indo-Pacific naval dynamics. While the islands were expected as a big weapon for offensive capacities, their primary advantage presently, is to raise awareness of the maritime domain and maintain a naval advantage for India and its friends.

India's maritime strategy work on principal of denial and control. Naval warfare theory explains that a navy could emerge victorious by controlling the littoral seas or denying their use to that adversary. Sea control is the strategy of choice for a superior force but requires a higher number of valuable assets in order to dictate terms with concerned states in littoral spaces over prolonged period of time. In contrast, a weaker force focusses all its combat efforts in denying the enemy the use of the near-seas; a strategy of "sea denial" that is akin to an anti-access and area-denial strategy suitable for small forces. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands offer excellent potential to enable such a strategy of denial due to proximity with littoral states special quite near to emerging China.

India will likely construct the necessary infrastructure on the islands to create the right environment for an anti-access and area-denial maritime exclusion zone to have an upper hand event of a conflict. China is beefing up its naval capabilities on the artificial islands. India would probably be able to host routine visits by the Indian Navy's current and future assets that include aircraft carriers and nuclear submarines. It could also be the base for elements of the Army's Special Forces and Naval Commandos, the "Marcos", an SU-30 MKI all-weather fighter squadron and a maritime *Jaguar* squadron on a permanent basis.

Interestingly, the safety policy paper referred to earlier highlighted the significance of maritime command and rejection as operational requirements. India's maritime denial strategy is primarily revamped towards the Indian Ocean's South China Sea Fleet. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands will support this strategy by contributing further to the maritime predominance of the Indian Navy in the East Indian Ocean region and its influence beyond the Malacca Strait in conjunction with a variety of countries, including Indonesia, Australia, Vietnam and the United States.

In sum, it could be argued that these Islands will provide basis of India's maritime way towards the western Pacific and beyond.

### **Role in Indian Maritime Strategy**

India's maritime security strategy paper, which was released in January 2016, emphasized the strategic significance of the islands and underlined their importance as a basis for Indian power projection into the Western Pacific and beyond.

1. Positioning an advance fleet of naval warships with Landing Platform Docks (LPDs) in the islands by the near future
2. Placing a ship-based nuclear missile system there as a deterrent measure and second push back strike option.

Along with the coherent policies, India will make sure to deploy more electronic sensors to and strategic assets to enable the automatic identification of vessels and long-range identification and tracking systems together with human and technical intelligence capabilities, which would enable network-centric operations to be conducted from the islands. This will give India real time data fusion capabilities as well as assisting the region through identification operations and making its presence with real time data collection of usage of route to act in a proper time.

These islands, not at time of peace but in the state of war will play crucial role against likely rival China as it can stop all the trade and oil by choking strait of Malacca crippling the country's economy and forcing it to accept the defeat.

### **Andaman and Nicobar as India's Third Fleet Option**

The Indian Navy is expected to expand beyond means. The strength of the existing Eastern Fleet would be increasing due to expansion of operational space. It would therefore need to raise the amount of strategic ships accessible from 137 to about 200 by approximately 40 percent. By 2027, the completion of the expansion of the fleet will be a reorientation towards a three-fleet blue water navy with versatile control. It is expected that the ANC would become the far Eastern Naval command and distinct from the two existing commands.

On that note, a third fleet option in the Islands will make sure the better co-operation between that fleet, the future far Eastern Fleet and the US Seventh Fleet and the Australian Western Fleet, stationed near Perth as these are strategic allies in IOR against China's expanding footprint in IOR and everywhere.

Further, the creation of a trans-shipment hub on the standards at par with greatest facilities across the world, on the island of Nicobar could be an economic and strategic game changer with the potential to rival the ports of Singapore or Colombo (busiest and game changer of mother country).

Such co-operation could pave the way for increasing India's maritime engagement and give it the ability to have access across South-East Asia to the South-West Pacific and ahead. Though India has no permanent military presence in the Pacific but that may not be out of the question in the coming years ahead. On that note, a third Fleet option in the ANC will help to facilitate better co-operation between that fleets.

### **Sino-Indian rivalry and ANC**

As stated earlier, the security strategy is focused on the significance of sea control and sea denial as operational requirements. ANC is important in asserting its strategic policies against china due to its proximity as compared to mainland China.

Since the Indian Navy is consisted in this theater, China is enhancing capabilities in the Indian Ocean, for example by gearing up to work with its base in Djibouti, primarily to combat the piracy of the ocean. Beijing is constructing a sequence of business ships in the Indian Ocean in the shape of the String of Pearls. These ports, strategically situated in Myanmar, Pakistan, Sri Lanka and the Maldives, could ultimately serve a military objective and powerful resistance to India's dominance.

China is currently worried that, unless it can secure the SLOCs through the Malacca Strait to the Indian Ocean and Persian Gulf. As it might be susceptible to a blockade led by the U.S. and India during a war that puts obstacles on every front to prevent China from expanding and becoming a worldwide player. Yet America and India are unlikely to do this, considering that any effort to block the channel would be the announcement of conflict against China. While this stays an alternative in a wartime scenario, there are other excellent grounds for developing these two Islands which may help to dissuade China. However, String of Pearls is the main potential theory that to know Beijing's intentions to boost up its maritime policies. As under which China will develop the strategic Military bases and Naval ports that the major points are to be integrated and seen in a form of pearls and connect Chinese mainland to the Horn of Africa.

The true benefit given to India by the Andamans is their capacity to monitor critical waters of the Malacca Strait and the South China Sea. As the vital major point of entry and departure to and from the Indian Ocean region, the Maldives give unrivaled supervision and tracking of the Malacca Strait. A consistent surveillance and reaction system will assist India in detecting Chinese ships in account when entering the Indian Ocean through Strait's shallow seas.

### **Sound Surveillance Sensors Chain**

Besides turning the Andaman and Nicobar Islands into a military base, India is anticipated to conduct joint initiatives with its global partners, Japan and the US to deploy noise surveillance devices (SOSUS) around the islands. This is a significant component in managing and monitoring the operations of the South China Sea Fleet in the Indian Ocean. Australia could enter the noise sensor setup as it will also assist Australia to project its impact in the Indian Ocean and thereby assist track the motions of Chinese submarines in the wider Indo-Pacific region.

Cooperation between India, America and Japan on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands may not prevent the deployment of acoustic devices and a joint project collaboration on the building of an optical fiber cable from Chennai to Port Blair is anticipated to be possible. Once finished, this network is probable to be incorporated with the current U.S.- Japan "Fishhook" network developed specifically to monitor submarine activities in the South China Sea and the Indian Ocean Rim of the People's Liberation Army-Navy.

It is thought that the starting point for the above cooperation was the trip of Prime Minister Narendra Modi to Washington in 2015, when India and the United States decided to intensify their cooperation on maritime security. New Delhi is said to have chosen to move forward with its plans to reinforce its Near Sea Defense after the Ministers of Defense of the association of South East Asian Nations jointly expressed their willingness for India to perform a safety position beyond the Indian Ocean at the meeting of ASEAN Defense Ministers in Langkawi, Malaysia, in March 2016. Although the above events are not officially confirmed, it is completely

feasible that China's anti-access / area rejection (A2/AD) policies in South East Asia could have acted as a catalyst for an Indian reaction in the Bay of Bengal.

Beijing is thought to have been building an undersea "Great Wall" in the South China Sea by setting up a range of ocean-floor acoustic detectors to detect U.S. submarines. On the US Navy's SOSUS scheme, which was initially built to monitor Soviet submarines in the mid-1950s during the Cold War.

Reports that the Chinese Navy is on the verge of operationalizing its sensor chain may have pushed New Delhi to pursue its own undersea sensor project in the South Asian littoral area. Those developments could prompt Australian policymakers to join with strategic allies of India, Japan and the United States in a collaborative partnership.

In the next five to ten years, it is expected that the Andaman and Nicobar Islands will be added as the third fleet of the Indian Navy the Far Eastern Naval Command, in turn under the overall command of the Tri-Command Service, thus ensuring its multipurpose operation ability. That arrangement could easily be the face of India's expanding role as a net security provider in the greater Indo-Pacific region.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

In 2000, a panel studying the conduct of the Kargil War with Pakistan the previous year recommended converting FORTAN into a tri-service command to enable better coordination between the armed forces in times of peace and in times of war. As, lack of joint efforts caused great damage to Indian forces during the conflicts.

Presence of India in IOR and in far eastern side of IOR is important in only one concern, during war that far front can be used for reorientation of forces to gather around and make a powerful comeback. As the distance between ANC and Pakistan is good enough to counter missile attack through ABM assets is quite possible. Indian naval presence around the Bay of Bengal make it very affective to assert its will in the matters of littoral states that will push India towards regional supremacy, a real nightmare to Pakistan's national interest.

India's "INS Arihant," a nuclear-powered ballistic missile, became operational last year, offering the nation the capacity to launch soil, air and water nuclear attacks. Pakistan is collaborating on cruise missiles launched by the sea to finish its own triad. Pakistan has longer-range nuclear weapons such as the Shaheen3 missile that can reach India's Andaman Islands near Southeast Asia. Pakistan's approach is mainly "Indian centric", that any development in the nuclear or military buildup on the hand of India would create great concerns for Pakistan's security. India is developing long-range ballistic missiles able to strike targets across China as Indian security approach is mainly "China centric". While India's major focus regarding Andaman and Nicobar Islands is China and Sino-Indian rivalry holds challenges for Pakistan as well and can become a state with full opportunities and house of proxy war of Asian giants. China has, in order to secure SLOCs is working on alternative of SILK ROAD initiative to counter India's expanding influence in Indian ocean region.

With the flagship project of CPEC, Pakistan can face increase proxy wars to sabotage the project by adversaries of both China and Pakistan to make Pakistan an economically weak country and Beijing's dependence on Indian Ocean sea routes. With the growing influence, across the region due heavy naval built up, Islamabad could find it hard to make diplomatic achievements in far eastern countries and thus lack the integration in economic markets of those countries due to excess influence and rivalry of Asian giants.

### **Conclusion**

India's long-awaited dream to be a region sole power that will pave its path towards global power includes Andaman and Nicobar Islands as essential parts. These islands and archipelago are important regarding two main pillars of dominance, economy and security. Economic part regarding natural resources, natural tourism, rich ecological environment whereas, security consist of presence of armed forces around the region even far from mainland is a plus towards securing sea line of communication (SLOCs). It is also a major strategic location that can be decisive against China during arm tussle. These islands have implication regarding Pakistan by denying its ability to raise immediately command center through nuclear attack and under power Pakistan Navy to end and compete with eastern fleet after fighting with two mainland fleets. These islands and their developments are a major reason of opposition to CPEC and BRI initiative, as their success make these islands less important in their

form of major check to the trade of China a regional rival to India but not to forget the major development regarding Chabahar port in this context. Further development will also play intrinsic role in future.



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