

# The Strategic Significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in India's Indo-Pacific Vision: Limited Hard Balancing, Minilateralism, and Maritime Statecraft

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## ABSTRACT

The emergence of the Indo-Pacific as the principal theatre of twenty-first-century geopolitics has transformed the strategic significance of maritime spaces and island territories. For India, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have become increasingly central to national security planning, regional diplomacy, and maritime strategy due to their location near the Strait of Malacca, one of the world's most important maritime chokepoints. This article examines the role of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands within India's evolving Indo-Pacific vision through the theoretical lenses of limited hard balancing, strategic autonomy, and minilateralism. It argues that the islands have evolved from peripheral territories into strategic assets that enable India to shape regional order, monitor critical sea lines of communication, strengthen maritime deterrence, and deepen cooperation with Indo-Pacific partners. The article further contends that the Great Nicobar infrastructure project represents a new phase of infrastructural maritime statecraft that integrates economic development, strategic logistics, and geopolitical influence. Drawing upon contemporary scholarship and recent developments between 2024 and 2026, the article demonstrates that the islands occupy a central position in India's effort to navigate intensifying Sino-American rivalry while preserving strategic autonomy. Nevertheless, environmental concerns, indigenous rights, infrastructural limitations, and institutional challenges continue to constrain the realization of their full strategic potential.

**Keywords:** Indo-Pacific, Andaman and Nicobar Islands, India, Maritime strategy, Strategic autonomy, limited hard balancing, Minilateralism

## INTRODUCTION

The Indo-Pacific is the most strategic region of the 21st century. Strategic competition, economic interdependence, technology race and maritime security issues have made the Indo-Pacific a region of strategic focus, connecting the Indian and Pacific Oceans. New players and rising powers—primarily China, and increasingly middle powers like India, Japan, Australia and Indonesia—are changing the face of the region. As a result, oceanography has re-emerged as a key factor in the national power and strategic influence. The India's Indo Pacific approach is a geopolitical imperative and strategic opportunity (MEA, 2018). India is a state that is

in the middle of the Indian Ocean and is increasingly connected with the global trade networks, and thus has large maritime interests outside of its immediate neighbourhood. These interests involve ensuring sea lines of communication, keeping energy flows secure, ensuring protection of maritime commerce, and ensuring a favourable balance of power. In this context, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are in a special strategic location. The islands are at the mouth of the Bay of Bengal and the mouth of the Andaman Sea, and are in sight of the western approaches to the Strait of Malacca, through which a large share of the world's commerce and the energy supplies of East Asia passes. The geographical location offers India many benefits in the areas of maritime

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surveillance, logistics, intelligence gathering and naval operations. In recent years, all such benefits have been further strengthened with significant investments in military infrastructure, connectivity and strategic development projects, especially the Great Nicobar project.

In this grand change, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands have become one of the most important strategic assets of India. Their location near the Strait of Malacca provides India with unique opportunities to enhance maritime surveillance, strengthen regional connectivity, and contribute to the evolving security architecture of the Indo-Pacific (MEA, 2024). The importance placed on the islands in the context of strategy has therefore been growing not only because of their location, but also due to the wider shift in how India's leaders view the nature of strategic power and how they see their contribution to the role of a maritime nation.

The article says that the strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is increasing as a result of the broader changes in Indian Indo-Pacific Policy. The islands are not just about military presence, they are means for a limited hard balance, for maritime state-building and for minilateral security assistance. In these capacities, they play a role in India's quest for strategic autonomy and adaptation to evolving regional power dynamics.

### **Literature Review and Theoretical Framework**

The geopolitical importance of islands has always had a place of prominence in geopolitical thinking. Classical maritime theorists like Alfred Thayer Mahan (1890) have focused on sea power, naval strength and control over maritime chokepoints as key factors in a nation's influence. Nicholas Spykman (1942) also claimed that geography is still an important factor in state behaviour and strategic opportunity. In today's academic research on the maritime strategy of India, these principles are followed. The ability of India to exploit the Indian Ocean's geographical location is crucial for its rise as one of the great powers in the future, Brewster (2014) asserts. The Indian Ocean is also seen to be the main theatre of geopolitical competition in the future, as pointed out by Kaplan (2010) who uses the Indian Ocean as an example of a strategic advantage that India will enjoy over the long haul. In recent years, the Indo-Pacific region has emerged as a focal point of growing scholarly interest as a strategic region of the world. The new institutional

arrangements and strategic partnerships for a rules-based maritime order highlighted by Heiduk and Wilkins (2019), Scott (2019) are the most significant developments. The Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad) has been a focal point of interest in this literature, as it has come to be seen as a platform for democratic maritime powers to align their actions on challenges that they share.

There are three main interpretations of the doctrine of strategic behaviour in the Indian context, which has been a subject of theoretical debate. The first sees India balancing China by playing the military modernization and strategic partnership game. The second explanation of India's behaviour is the "hedging" theory, which sees India engaging in a balance of cooperation and competition. The third, which is becoming more dominant, is based on strategic autonomy (Till, 2018). While India is aiming to build up its capabilities, it is not prepared to go down a path of limited hard balancing. This is done in this framework as it captures India's attempt to enhance the deterrence without committing to formal alliance (Acharya, 2023).

The literature on minilateralism offers a second conceptual approach. Minilateralisation has become an adaptable institutional format that can provide solutions to the regional security challenges without the rigidity of conventional alliances (Mahan, 1890). The framework is useful to comprehend India's involvement in the Quad and other Indo-Pacific partnerships. These theoretical approaches complement each other and offer the basis for this analysis of the A&N Islands as tools for strategic autonomy and statecraft in the sea, as well as for building regional order (Biba, 2026).

### **Strategic Autonomy, Balancing and the Indo-Pacific Debate**

The Indian policy on the Indo-Pacific is often understood by the terms of strategic autonomy and balancing. India's policy towards the Indo Pacific has been understood through the lens of strategic autonomy and balancing (Kumar, 2024). Indian foreign policy has been based on a principle of keeping the decision-making process independent and not entering into any commitments of an alliance nature since independence. The current strategic scenario is very skewed from the Cold War phase but strategic autonomy still influences India's relations with big and regional powers (Pant and Rej, 2018).

In this article, it is argued that India's Indo-Pacific

approach is a strategy of hard balancing but with limited scope, and that it is done within the context of strategic autonomy. India has not gone for direct confrontation, but has been working to build maritime power, bolster regional cooperation, and build strategic infrastructure. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are an example of this. The country's military infrastructure, surveillance capabilities and connectivity investments are improving India's strategic posture in the Indo-Pacific while enabling it to make its own foreign policy decisions (Shah, 2025). In this context, the evolution of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands – and especially the Great Nicobar project – is a reflection of India's attempt to transform geographical opportunities into strategic influence for the long term (MEA, 2024). The islands thus serve as more than just a military tool; they are a strategic approach to bolstering India's maritime security, economic strength, and influence in the region, while maintaining strategic autonomy.

### **Geostrategic Importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands**

Geography is the base of the strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Geography has been a crucial force shaping the strength of a nation and their capacity to exert power, establish trade and influence regional dynamics throughout history. In today's times with the region of Indo-Pacific region being connected by maritime ways for economic growth and strategic rivalries, not much geography will have benefits like that of India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are located on the sea border of the Bay of Bengal and Andaman Sea, and are a chain of over 570 islands extending about 800 kilometres from the north to the south. They are in a strategic position on some of the world's most vital maritime routes and give India a forward presence in Southeast Asia. Located only 150 kilometres from the western end of the Strait of Malacca, one of the most strategically important maritime chokepoints in the world, the southernmost island, Indira Point in Great Nicobar, is in close proximity to the Strait.

The Strait of Malacca is a geopolitically significant trade route in the world. It is a major route for a significant share of international trade and energy supplies with connections to the Indian Ocean and the South China Sea and the rest of the Pacific Ocean (Rajagopalan, 2020). It is estimated that almost a third of the world's

sea-borne commerce and much of the energy imports from East Asia travel through this strait each year. Any bottlenecks in trading in the strait would have a significant impact on the world's supply chains, energy markets and regional security (Kaplan, 2010).

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands from India's perspective are strategically located close to this maritime corridor. The islands offer an exclusive platform for India to keep an eye on commercial and military traffic between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The deployment of maritime surveillance systems throughout the archipelago adds a layer of capabilities to India's response to naval movements, intelligence gathering and situational awareness in an increasingly strategic area (Mohan, 2012). Such capabilities represent a valuable strategic asset in today's day and age, where information superiority is becoming a critical tool for military success.

This has increased India's worries about the "balancing of power in the Indian Ocean Region", as strategic analysts put it. China's reliance on the Strait of Malacca is of special interest. Much of China's imports of energy from the Middle East and Africa pass through this strait on the way to Chinese ports. This weakness has been dubbed the "Malacca Dilemma" by the former Chinese President Hu Jintao, who pointed out that in times of conflict or crisis, external actors might be able to impact these vital supply routes.

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are in the heart of this strategic equation. They are situated where India has a potential latent capability to watch, monitor and even control maritime traffic using the Malacca Strait. India has long stood for free navigation and respect for international maritime law, but that geographic advantage is always a factor in strategic decision-making by the regional players. Geopolitically, the islands are an asset of positional advantage which can't be duplicated by technology or military investment.

The strategic importance of the islands lies not just in their surveillance and intelligence-gathering capabilities. They also offer significant benefits for naval and air forces and offer significant benefits in terms of operation. The military bases have the capacity to support long-range maritime patrol, naval deployment and logistical operations in the eastern Indian Ocean, across the archipelago. These are helping India to carry out anti-submarine warfare, search and rescue, humanitarian assistance and maritime interdiction operations. In a world of growing maritime competition, this operating flexibility

can only be of more and more value.

In 2001, the establishment of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) was a significant development in the recognition of the strategic value of the islands. The ANC was India's first command integrated command service by the three services, namely the Army, the Navy, and the Air Force as well as the Coast Guard. This institutional innovation was an awareness that coordinated joint operations were needed to make effective use of the islands, not service-specific. Over time, the command has evolved into a critical component of India's maritime security architecture, facilitating enhanced surveillance, rapid response capabilities, and strategic coordination.

More recently, the islands have been refurbished and modernised which has further enhanced their operational utility. India has bolstered its capability to maintain a continuous strategic engagement throughout the region through runway extension at the main airfields, strengthening its naval facilities, setting up improved radar networks and upgrading communication infrastructure. The developments are a sign of the fact that geography is not a source of power, strategic advantages need to be backed up with infrastructure, institutional capacity and technological investments.

The geostrategic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands reaches beyond the region, influencing India's ties with its neighbours as well. The islands have become significant points of intersection in wider networks of maritime cooperation with the growing security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific. With the increasing security cooperation in the Indo-Pacific region, the islands have become significant points of intersection in wider networks of maritime cooperation (GOI, 2015). They're situated in a position that allows for joint exercises, logistics support, intelligence sharing, and maritime domain awareness programs among the United States, Japan, Australia, France and Singapore. As such, the islands are not just a part of India's national security but also play a role in the broader global efforts to maintain a stable and rules-based maritime order.

Strategically, the archipelago is significant as a sign of the fundamental shift in the nature of power in the Indo Pacific. While the security perspective of the past was limited to territorial defence, today's maritime competition is more about control over flows, connectivity, infrastructure and information. The Andaman and Nicobar Islands are at a centre stage in these emerging dynamics as they allow India to have an influence over important

maritime networks without resorting to the use of force. They are not just for military operations, but are also important for their transformative influence on strategic environments.

The islands have thus become a part of the most strategic asset of the Indian Indo-Pacific strategy, moving from the periphery to the centre of the Indian state. The combination of their geographical positioning, strategic importance, and geopolitical significance makes them crucial to India's future in the Indian Ocean and its geopolitical standing for years to come.

With China's growing presence in the Indian Ocean, the strategic significance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has further accentuated. The significance of the islands as tools of maritime surveillance, deterrence and strategic awareness has been accentuated by China's steadily increasing naval presence and concerns about the security of the critical sea lines of communication. Hence, the archipelago has become even more critical for India's bid to strike a balance in the vast Indo Pacific arena and protect the Indian interests.

### **Great Nicobar and Infrastructural Maritime Statecraft**

The Great Nicobar project is one of the most significant changes in India's Indo-Pacific policy, which aims at converting geographical advantage into strategic influence in the long term. The project is not just a development effort, but a reflection of India's understanding of the importance of maritime power in the 21st century, which goes beyond mere naval capabilities to infrastructure, logistics and connectivity. As a result, Great Nicobar has become an example of what one might call "infrastructural maritime statecraft," which involves the simultaneous pursuit of economic, geopolitical and security interests through strategic infrastructure.

Great Nicobar has much more than a commercial value. Recent estimates have pointed to the strategic significance of the island's position close to major sea lines of communication (SLOC) between the Indian and Pacific Oceans. The synergy between the port facilities, the airport infrastructure, its logistics network and its surveillance system is expected to make India more capable of tracking the movement of ships in the eastern Indian Ocean and keep its military presence there (Economic Times, 2025). Modern assessments have therefore termed the project as an 'economic and

strategic' investment in India's Indo-Pacific future.

The initiative should also be seen in the context of the growing geopolitical competition in the Indo-Pacific region. With the growing use of infrastructure as a tool of statecraft, states have been aiming to bolster their influence by building ports, logistics corridors and connectivity networks. In this context, the Great Nicobar project illustrates India's intent to increase its presence in the maritime arena and its role in regional economic and security ties (Eurasia Review, 2025). The project not only boosts connectivity but also lessens India's reliance on external powers, aligning with the country's goal of building strategic autonomy.

The project has also sparked controversy over its impact on the environment and society. Great Nicobar has sensitive ecological habitats and also hosts the indigenous communities whose interest needs to be taken into consideration in development planning. Achieving a balance between strategic and economic goals and sustainability and social inclusion is therefore a key challenge for policy makers.

However, the Great Nicobar project is an important step in India's sea power revolution. It reflects a change in the naval-centric approach to a more comprehensive strategy, involving infrastructure, connectivity, and economic resilience in its broader geopolitical scope. With the Indo-Pacific region becoming more critical in the international political landscape, Great Nicobar is expected to become a more important hub for India's strategic interests and strengthening its status as a maritime power.

### Constraints and Challenges

Even as they gain increasing strategic importance, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands also have some challenges that could be a hurdle in achieving the complete realization of India's Indo-Pacific aspirations. Geographical sustainability is a huge benefit to India, but transforming that influence into sustainable strategic influence also involves dealing with infrastructural, environmental and governance challenges.

One of the major issues is related to infrastructure and connectivity. The islands are still geographically isolated from India and it is logistically challenging and costly to transport people, equipment, and construction materials. While there has been an increase in investments in connectivity and military infrastructure, there are still significant gaps in transportation networks, transportation infrastructure, and public infrastructure. There will

therefore have to be continued investment if the islands are to serve as significant economic and strategic centres.

Another challenge is environmental issues. Ecologically sensitive forests, coastal ecosystems and marine habitats exist in the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. The debate over the potential environmental impacts of large-scale infrastructure projects has been raised, especially the Great Nicobar development project. Balancing strategic and developmental goals with an ecological sustainability is thus important for policy makers. If not, it can jeopardize the sustainability of development and could lead to a national & international backlash.

Issues concerning indigenous peoples have also been of interest. Traditional living patterns and local socio-cultural context could be impacted by development projects and economic activities. Therefore, further development plans should be drawn up in a way that is socially inclusive and sensitive to local communities while achieving economic and strategic goals.

In terms of governance implementation issues are still very high. A large-scale construction project can go through several stages of agency approvals, regulatory processes and other administrative steps, potentially taking longer to get built and making it more expensive. Effective coordination between civilian authorities, environmental agencies and security institutions will play an important role in the successful implementation of long-term strategic goals.

Last but certainly not least, the islands' strategic value could lead to vulnerabilities. In times of geopolitical tensions, critical infrastructure and military facilities on the islands may be targeted more frequently in the ever contested Indo-Pacific. So having sufficient resilience, surveillance and security preparedness will continue to be a policy priority.

The challenges are not to take away from the strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Instead, they emphasize the difficulty of converting geographical location into lasting strategic power. India's Indo-Pacific policy is expected to be successful in the long term only if it is able to achieve a balance between security concerns and environmental sustainability, social inclusion and good governance.

### Conclusion

With the Indo Pacific becoming the main theatre of the current geopolitical struggle, the strategic significance

of maritime areas and key sea lines of communication has been increased. In this changing regional landscape, the strategic importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands has grown to new heights in India. In the context of India's Indo Pacific policy the islands have been highlighted as playing a critical role in improving maritime surveillance, connectivity in the region and India's power to safeguard its interests in the wider Indian Ocean.

The analysis shows that the strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands is not just the proximity to the Strait of Malacca, it is also that the islands have the potential to serve the broader objective of India's strategic autonomy and influence in the region. The islands offer India a distinct advantage in terms of their geography, which can be used for security and economic gain, as the region becomes more important in global politics and maritime competition increases. Their position gives India an opportunity to enhance maritime domain awareness, protect the vital sea lines of communication and help ensure stability in the region without being cemented into a formal alliance framework.

The article has also underscored the importance of the Great Nicobar project as an instance of India's new policy of infrastructural maritime statecraft. The project aims to create a comprehensive and integrated development of the port, its infrastructure and connectivity, while also fostering strategic partnerships to leverage geographic advantage into geopolitical and economic influence in the medium to long term. Through this, it portrays a general reorientation in India's strategic thinking in which the power of the sea is not just a military one but also infrastructure, supply-chain resilience, and regionally connectivity.

The study acknowledges, however, that there are still many obstacles to be overcome. However, the implementation of India's island strategy is still influenced by environmental issues, indigenous rights, infrastructural restrictions, and governance challenges. Their future potential will thus rely on the capacity of the policy makers to weigh strategic needs against sustainable and inclusive development principles.

At the end of the day, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands are a pillar of India's Indo Pacific Strategy. The importance of their role in the 21st century is growing as a result of the convergence of geography, maritime strategy and geopolitical change. Effective development and management of these islands will be vital to India's ability to become a key maritime power and one of the

influential regional powers of the future, as the region's stakes grow and competition within it is rising.

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