

Prime Minister Narendra Modi in the Andamans: India ends the Neglect of the Strategic Island Chain

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Executive Summary

Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi made his first visit to the Andaman and Nicobar islands from 29 to 30 December 2018. Modi's visit puts a spotlight on the belated development of the strategically important island territory. Since 2014, when the National Democratic Alliance government came into power, Delhi has made incremental advances in building infrastructure, strengthening connectivity, promoting trade and tourism and boosting the security presence on the island chain.

Introduction

In late December 2018, Indian Prime Minister Narendra Modi visited the Andaman and Nicobar Islands for the first time since assuming office. Commemorating the 75th anniversary of Subhas Chandra Bose hoisting the Indian tricolor flag there, Modi renamed three large islands. The Ross, Neil, and Havelock islands, named after colonial-era English officials, became Netaji Subhas Chandra Bose Island, Shaheed Dweep and Swaraj Dweep respectively. Notwithstanding the rhetoric, Modi's visit is symbolic of a larger picture- the renewed strategic salience of the island chain and encompassing sea, for India.

The curved cluster of islands that constitutes Andaman and Nicobar featured in maritime strategy as far back as the Chola Empire in the 11th century. Colonial rule first came to the islands in the 18th century under the Dutch. During the Seven Years War, Britain acutely felt the need for an 'all-year base'¹ in the Bay of Bengal, where ships could retreat to in conflict while maintaining a strategic position.² Andaman and Nicobar drew Britain's attention. Accordingly, Archibald Blair, a British hydrographer, surveyed the islands and established an outpost there in 1789. Functioning as a prison colony since the mid-1800s, the islands faded in strategic mental maps until the Japanese wrested control of them from the British during World War II. Subhas Chandra Bose, an ally of Japan, then established a provisional Indian government there. However, it was short-lived. The British reclaimed the islands and eventually surrendered them to India after independence.

In a sardonic twist, the islands' homecoming did not fortify their strategic value for India. By dint of their remote location, they remained at the periphery of Delhi's gaze for decades, often overlooked in favour of a fixation with the mainland. The Indian Ocean itself declined in maritime importance in the post-war period and with it, the islands too. Yet, this obscurity gradually reversed in the latter half of the 20th century. China's unprecedented economic

¹ Wong, Lin Ken. 1991. "The Strategic Significance of Singapore". In *A History of Singapore*, p22. Singapore: Oxford University Press.

² Dasgupta, Jayant. 2002. 'Japanese in Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Red Sun Over Black Water', pp 26-27. Delhi. Manas Publications Ltd.

growth engendered its stakes in the Indian Ocean and the littorals. India abandoned its insular outlook in the 1990s and began to 'look east' for partners across the seas. The eastern Indian Ocean and its subzones, connecting South and Southeast Asia, correspondingly became critical in maritime strategy for India. The Andaman Sea in particular, at the mouth of the Malacca Straits, assumed tactical importance. Delhi, in turn, slowly picked up the slack in developing its capabilities in the region. Its strategic focus towards the islands peaked in 2001 with the establishment of the first tri-service command, the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC). Yet, a more rounded upgrading of the islands remained on the back burner thereafter. The Modi administration has attempted to reverse this by policy and action to improve infrastructure and connectivity, security mechanisms, trade, and tourism activities. These developments warrant a deeper look into the context of the growing maritime importance of the islands.

Island Developments under the Modi Government

Since coming into power in 2014, the Modi administration has noticeably shown an inclination towards better integrating India's islands into the polity. The clearest signpost of this agenda came in 2017. In June of that year, the government established the Island Development Agency (IDA). Chaired by the Home Minister, the IDA is an 'apex body' overseeing the improvement of islands including the Andaman and Nicobar in the east, and Lakshadweep in the west. It has identified 26 islands for development, of which 16 are in the Andaman and Nicobar group. The IDA convened its fifth and latest meeting in February 2019, during which it noted tax incentives by the Ministry of Commerce for manufacturing and service sector investments in the islands.³ Under the government's new policy outlook, Andaman and Nicobar have witnessed incremental development across sectors.

In developing the islands, the administration recognized the deficit in infrastructure and connectivity, which precipitated over time due to distance and neglect. In response, the government announced a sweeping ₹100 billion (\$1.9 billion) plan in 2015, to transform the islands into India's 'first maritime hub'.⁴ The 15-year plan visualised the development of several islands into ports, with facilities such as dry docks and ship repair capacities. It further sought to acquire 60 ships for both cargo and passengers.

Simultaneously, the government has sought to shore up intra-island connectivity. For example, the National Highways and Infrastructure Development Corporation is executing a number of construction and upgrading projects on the Andaman Trunk Road (National Highway 4), a vital 333-kilometre transport artery that spans the North, Middle, and South Andaman Islands. The government has also tabled plans to operate seaplanes (amphibious aircraft capable of landing on water) within the islands under the 'UDAN' (*Ude Desh ka Aam*

³ 'Shri Rajnath Singh chairs fifth meeting of Island Development Agency', *Press Information Bureau, Government of India*. 19 February 2019. <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=188734> Accessed on 21 February 2019.

⁴ Arora, Rajat. 'Modi government's Rs 10,000 crore plan to develop Andaman and Nicobar islands', *Economic Times*. 26 September 2015. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/economy/infrastructure/modi-governments-rs-10000-crore-plan-to-transform-andaman-and-nicobar-islands/articleshow/49111067.cms> Accessed on 20 January 2019.

Nagrik [Flight for the Common Citizen of the Country]) scheme. At its fifth meeting, the IDA identified four islands (Swaraj Deep, Shaheed Dweep, Hutbay, and Long) for these operations. Alongside physical infrastructure, there has likewise been a push for increased digital connectivity within the islands and to the mainland. During Modi's visit, he outlined the government's plan for a 'State Wide Area Network' to connect 12 of the islands. Prior to that, in December 2018, the Ministry of Environment, Forests, and Climate Change cleared the proposal for an over 2000-kilometre undersea optical cable between Chennai and eight islands in the cluster. Earlier, in mid-2018, the state-owned telecommunications provider BSNL assigned Japanese company NEC a contract to design and engineer the cable, which would provide 'sufficient bandwidth'⁵ for connectivity, enterprise, and e-governance. More recently, following Modi's visit, the Indian telecommunication provider Airtel revealed that it would launch 4G mobile connectivity on the islands as well.

Given the maritime dynamics of the region and the interest of powers such as China in the Indian Ocean, security remains arguably the most important aspect for India with regard to Andaman and Nicobar. Delhi has focussed on upgrading the ANC, which for long was underpowered in capacity and quality. In early 2019, the government 'virtually finalised'⁶ a ₹50 billion (S\$0.95 billion) 10-year military infrastructure plan to develop the ANC. On 24 January 2019, the Indian Chief of Navy Staff Admiral Sunil Lanba commissioned the *INS Kohasa*, a refitted naval base on the North Andaman Island which will support helicopter and small aircraft.

The preceding years too saw several security developments at the ANC. The military set up a 'joint logistics node' to coordinate activities of the three services in 2018. The node facilitates common procurement of goods for the services and coordinates movement of troops and material to the ANC from the mainland. To bolster ship repairing capacities, the Indian Navy inducted a second 'floating dock' at Port Blair in May 2018. The indigenously designed dock can service various classes of naval ships, with a capacity of 8000 tonnes. The Indian Air Force also declared last year that combat aircraft would be permanently stationed at the ANC. A long-range missile testing facility at Rutland Island in South Andaman, proposed by the Defence Research and Development Organisation in 2013, was cleared by an environmental authority in mid-2018. In 2017, the Navy upgraded the Baaz naval station at Campbell Bay in Nicobar with an extended runway, and set up three forward operating bases. In November 2017, the ANC notably executed the first ever 'Defence of Andaman and Nicobar' exercise. The five-day exercise involved the participation of troops, aircraft, ships, and vehicles in drills and simulations such as fighter operations, amphibious landings, and reclaiming a captured island.⁷

⁵ 'Japan's NEC roped in for Chennai-A&N Islands submarine cable system', *Financial Express*. 12 July 2018. <https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/japans-nec-roped-in-for-chennai-an-islands-optical-submarine-cable-system/1241113/> Accessed on 12 February 2019.

⁶ Pandit, Rajat. 'Eye on China, government finalises Rs 5,000-crore defence plan for Andamans'. *The Times of India*. 27 January 2019. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/eye-on-china-government-finalises-rs-5000-crore-defence-plan-for-andamans/articleshow/67705690.cms> Accessed on 20 January 2019.

⁷ Pandit, Rajat. 'India conducts major exercise in strategically located Andaman and Nicobar islands', *The Times of India*. 24 November 2017. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-conducts-major-exercise-at-the-strategically-located-andaman-nicobar-islands/articleshow/61784692.cms> Accessed on 8 February 2019.

Delhi is also bolstering its security partnerships in the waters of the Andaman Sea. In November 2018, Singapore and India conducted the largest ever iteration of the annual Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) in the Andaman Sea. The ‘multi-dimensional’⁸ drills involved numerous vessels, aircraft, and weapons displays. In 2016, Delhi and Yangon together signed a standard operating procedure document for bilateral ‘Co-ordinated Patrols’ in the Andaman Sea.⁹ Delhi’s naval ties with Tokyo are also speculated to extend to Japanese warships visiting the ANC¹⁰ as part of a future Acquisition and Cross-Servicing Agreement (ACSA). Negotiations on the ACSA have been ongoing since 2018 and a ‘2+2’ dialogue (involving the foreign and defence ministers of both sides) in 2019 could conclude it. Additionally, India, Singapore and Thailand are slated to begin a new trilateral maritime exercise in the Andaman Sea in 2019.

The government’s security focus on the Andaman Sea is also reflected by ministerial visits. Two weeks after Modi’s visit, Indian Defence Minister Nirmala Sitharaman visited the ANC to witness a ‘joint amphibious exercise’¹¹ involving troops from all three services. Last year, then-Defence Minister Manohar Parrikar also visited the ANC for an overview of the security and strategic importance of the islands.

While the ANC is the focal point for maritime security apropos the islands, the government’s plans envision a more comprehensive development of the island territories. With important commercial maritime routes in the vicinity, trade is a key focus area and is being actively promoted, especially with respect to the surrounding areas.

Modi’s first visit to Jakarta in May 2018 yielded a bilateral ‘Shared Vision for Maritime Cooperation in the Indo-Pacific’. The document specifically mentions the islands with regard to improving trade and investment cooperation and tourism and cultural exchanges. It underscores enhancing connectivity between Andaman and Nicobar on the Indian side and Sumatra on the Indonesian side. These islands are natural waypoints for trade and tourism due to their proximity (Aceh is less than 200 kilometres from Indira Point, the southernmost tip of the Andaman and Nicobar cluster). Later in 2018, the Andaman Chamber of Commerce and Industry and the Aceh Chamber of Commerce and Industry signed a memorandum of understanding to further economic relations between the two sides. In late December 2018,

8 ‘Joint Statement by Smt. Nirmala Sitharaman, Minister of Defence of the Republic of India and Dr Ng Eng Hen, Minister for Defence of the Republic of Singapore’, Ministry of Defence Singapore. 20 November 2018. https://www.mindef.gov.sg/web/portal/mindef/news-and-events/latest-releases/article-detail/2018/november/20nov18_fs Accessed on 31 January 2019.

9 ‘India-Myanmar sign SOP on joint patrol’. *The Hindu*. 19 February 2016. <https://www.thehindu.com/news/cities/Visakhapatnam/indiamyanmar-sign-sop-on-joint-patrol/article8256109.ece> Accessed on 8 February 2019.

10 ‘Act East Policy: India-Japan 2+2 Dialogue to take place soon, which could lead to ACSA agreement being finalised’. *Financial Express*. 8 January 2019. <https://www.financialexpress.com/defence/act-east-policy-india-japan-22-dialogue-to-take-place-soon-which-could-lead-to-acsa-agreement-being-finalised/1437337/> Accessed on 31 January 2019.

11 ‘Sitharaman at amphibious drill by armed forces in Andaman and Nicobar’, *Economic Times*. 15 January 2019. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/sitharaman-at-amphibious-military-drill-by-armed-forces-in-andaman-and-nicobar/articleshow/67536615.cms> Accessed on 18 January 2019.

coinciding with Modi's visit, the two sides carried out a 'pioneer expedition'¹² for trade, wherein a ship carrying goods from Port Malahayati in Aceh made its way to Port Blair.

Tourism is likewise being bolstered. Reviewing the IDA's progress in June 2018, Modi highlighted the need for an 'integrated tourism-centric ecosystem'¹³ in the region. The government has since taken pertinent measures. It converted the Port Blair airport to an 'authorised immigration check post' in December 2018. This ordinance allows foreign tourists to directly travel to Port Blair, with the intention of increasing tourist numbers. The government also removed a 'Restricted Area Permit' for 29 inhabited islands in the chain last year. In August 2018, the National Institution for Transforming India (NITI Aayog), the government's policy body, conducted the first investors' conference on the development of Indian islands. The conference outlined tourism projects such as resorts on the Andaman and Nicobar and indicated that public-private partnerships would be pursued.¹⁴ In December 2018, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands Integrated Development Corporation, invited tenders for three eco-tourism resorts on Long, Smith and Aves islands respectively.¹⁵

Conclusion

The Andaman and Nicobar, long-forgotten in India's strategic circles, have returned to the fold. Through its tenure, the Modi government has both revived strategic interest in the islands and set out an ambitious agenda for their all-round development. With the looming prospect of the general election, the next government will likely have its work cut out for maintaining this momentum. Effective implementation of policy proposals, a perennial impediment even in mainland India, is bound to impede progress on the far-flung islands. It will take much political will and diligence to ensure that development continues.

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¹² 'Launch of trade mission between Aceh and Andaman promotes connectivity', *AntaraNews*, 31 December 2018. <https://en.antaranews.com/news/121627/launch-of-trade-mission-between-aceh-and-andaman-promotes-connectivity> Accessed on 24 January 2019.

¹³ 'Modi reviews progress made on development of islands'. *Economic Times*. 30 June 2018. <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/modi-reviews-progress-made-on-development-of-islands/articleshow/64805667.cms?from=mdr> Accessed on 2 February 2019.

¹⁴ Mukherjee, Sanjeeb. 'Govt plans to open up to 100 islands for eco-tourism in the next 12 months'. *Business Standard*. 11 August 2018. https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/govt-plans-to-open-up-to-100-islands-for-eco-tourism-in-the-next-12-months-118081100059_1.html Accessed on 11 February 2019.

¹⁵ 'ANIIDCO invites bids to set up premium resorts in 3 islands in Andaman and Nicobar', *Financial Express*. 26 December 2018. <https://www.financialexpress.com/industry/aniidco-invites-bids-to-set-up-premium-resorts-in-3-islands-in-andaman-and-nicobar/1425714/> Accessed on 12 February 2019.