



Andaman And Nicobar Islands: India's Strategic Outpost

March 17, 2014 *The Diplomat*

Missing Malaysian Airlines Flight MH370 has acquainted the world with a long-forgotten corner of the Indian Ocean: the Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI). Known to few outside India, the island chain constitutes a valuable geopolitical asset for that country and is positioned to play a pivotal role in any maritime competition between India and China in the 21st century. In December 2012, I traveled to the ANI to conduct research for my new book, *Cold Peace: China-India Rivalry in the 21st Century*. Here's what I found.

A distant and long-neglected sentinel outpost in the eastern Indian Ocean, the ANI are a chain of 572 islands (slightly more than 30 of which are inhabited) with a majority-Hindu population numbering just under 400,000. The most remarkable feature of the islands is their location: stretching over 500 miles north to south at the western entrance of the Strait of Malacca, they straddle one of the most critical naval and trade chokepoints in the world.

Some have likened the ANI to America's Indian Ocean military outpost at Diego Garcia. However, the comparison is inadequate; though host to far more modest military capabilities, the ANI are in a far more valuable location, are 200 times the size of Diego Garcia, and enjoy a more solid foundation of volcanic soil than the British-owned coral atoll. Covered in thick tropical vegetation and host to India's only active volcano, the ANI constitute just 0.2 percent of India's landmass but provide for 30 percent (600,000 sq kms) of the country's 200-nautical-mile exclusive economic zone (EEZ).

The islands occupied a marginal position in India's strategic consciousness until October 2001, when Delhi established a new Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) in the local capital, Port Blair. The ANC is India's first and only joint tri-service command, with rotating three-star commanders-in-chief from the Army, Navy and Air Force reporting directly to the chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee.

Today the command serves as the focal point for Indian engagement with regional navies in Southeast Asia. This includes bi-annual coordinated patrols with the navies of Thailand and Indonesia, the annual SIMBEX maritime exercises with Singapore, and the biennial Milan multilateral naval exercises.

The ANC's jurisdiction is limited to the islands' exclusive economic zone, with no formal responsibility for the South China Sea. Its tasks include maritime surveillance, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief, as well as suppressing gun running, narcotics smuggling, piracy, and poaching in India's EEZ. However, *Sainik Samachar*, a magazine published by the Indian Ministry of Defense, notes the ANC's mandate also includes "ensuring that the eastern approaches to the Indian Ocean comprising the three straits – Malacca, Lombok and Sunda – remain free from threats for shipping" as well as "monitor[ing] ships passing through the Six Degree and Ten Degree Channels."

This last responsibility is critical, as the ANI enjoy domain over two channels west of the Strait of Malacca that play host to the world's most important shipping lanes. The vast majority of international trade transiting the Strait of Malacca passes through the 200-kilometer-wide Six Degree Channel between the Indonesian island of Aceh and Great Nicobar, home to the Indian Navy's newest air base. This means the bulk of container traffic through the Strait of Malacca also passes through India's EEZ. To the north the 150-kilometer-wide Ten Degree Channel separates the Nicobar Islands from the Andaman Islands and is used by a much smaller volume of ships bound for the Bay of Bengal.

With such premier real estate, Western observers might expect the ANI to be a cornerstone in India's maritime strategy; a firewall against threats to the east and a power-projection platform serving India's interests in the Pacific. And yet, by all accounts the ANC is only modestly equipped militarily.

Force-levels on the islands have remained largely static since the tri-service command was established in October 2001. The ANC hosts just one infantry brigade, around 15 small warships – mostly amphibious landing ship tanks and small landing craft – and a handful of Dornier-228 maritime patrol aircraft, as well as Mi-8 and Chetak helicopters. The command has no unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), despite requests from ANC commanders for Israeli-origin Heron UAVs. Reports suggest two Indian Navy warships are regularly deployed to patrol the northern and southern islands and in January 2013 the Indian Navy commissioned its largest offshore patrol vessel at the ANC for maritime surveillance and patrolling.

Port Blair, which began as a penal colony, was long shunned by the Indian military hierarchy as a desolate outpost. Delhi has not "outlined a bold geo-economic vision for the island chain," says Indian analyst C. Raja Mohan which "can no longer be neglected as a group of islands suitable at best for the transportation of criminals and political offenders."

Other Indian strategists have begun calling for a greater utilization of the ANC. Retired Indian Air Marshal Dhiraj Kukreja says India needs to “grow out of its earlier thinking” and “develop the islands as a hub or ‘spring board’” for power projection in the region. Others in the military establishment see the ANC as a “trump card” against China, ideally positioned to interdict Chinese oil supplies from the Gulf and Africa in any potential Sino-Indian confrontation. Some 80 percent of China’s oil imports currently pass through the Strait of Malacca. Retired Rear Admiral Raja Menon argues: “Today they are merely SLOCS [Sea Lines of Communication]; tomorrow they will be the Chinese Jugular... [\$10 billion] spent on strengthening the Indian Navy’s SLOC interdiction capability would have given us a stranglehold on the Chinese routes into the Indian Ocean.”

Such statements tend to underestimate the practical challenges associated with any single country attempting to “cut off” China’s oil supplies, even one as favorably positioned as India. The only conditions under which an operation to “cut” China’s SLOCs would likely be effective – and where the ANI could be adequately leveraged – would be in the event of a large-scale, multi-country conflict with the Indian Navy operating in conjunction with the U.S. Navy, the littoral states in the Strait of Malacca, and others.

That doesn’t mean India cannot or should not further develop the ANI as a strategic asset. As it finally begins to add strategic substance to the Look East Policy it adopted in 1991, India is conducting increasingly sophisticated and numerous military exercises with the U.S.-allied countries of the Western Pacific, transforming its once-dormant relationships with Japan and Australia, searching for energy off the coast of Vietnam, and working to ensure freedom of navigation in the South China Sea.

With its capabilities more fully developed, the ANI could help India monitor military and commercial traffic passing between the Indian Ocean and the Western Pacific. They could provide India a forward position from which to serve its growing economic, political, and military interests in East Asia, and further position India as the “gatekeeper” of the Indian Ocean. At a time the People’s Liberation Army Navy is increasingly active in the Indian Ocean – including the recent deployment of its first nuclear submarine to the area – the timing is ripe.