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Strategic Importance of Andaman & Nicobar Islands for India: A Critical Analysis

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Abstract: Location, Geography, resources etc. are very crucial aspects while deciding importance of any area. In the light of these aspects, Andaman & Nicobar Islands have great importance for India in Strategic, economic, defence and many more areas. Developmental efforts of these areas will definitely be a boost for Andaman & Nicobar Islands in particular & India in general.

Keywords: Andaman & Nicobar, Strategic Importance, India.

Introduction

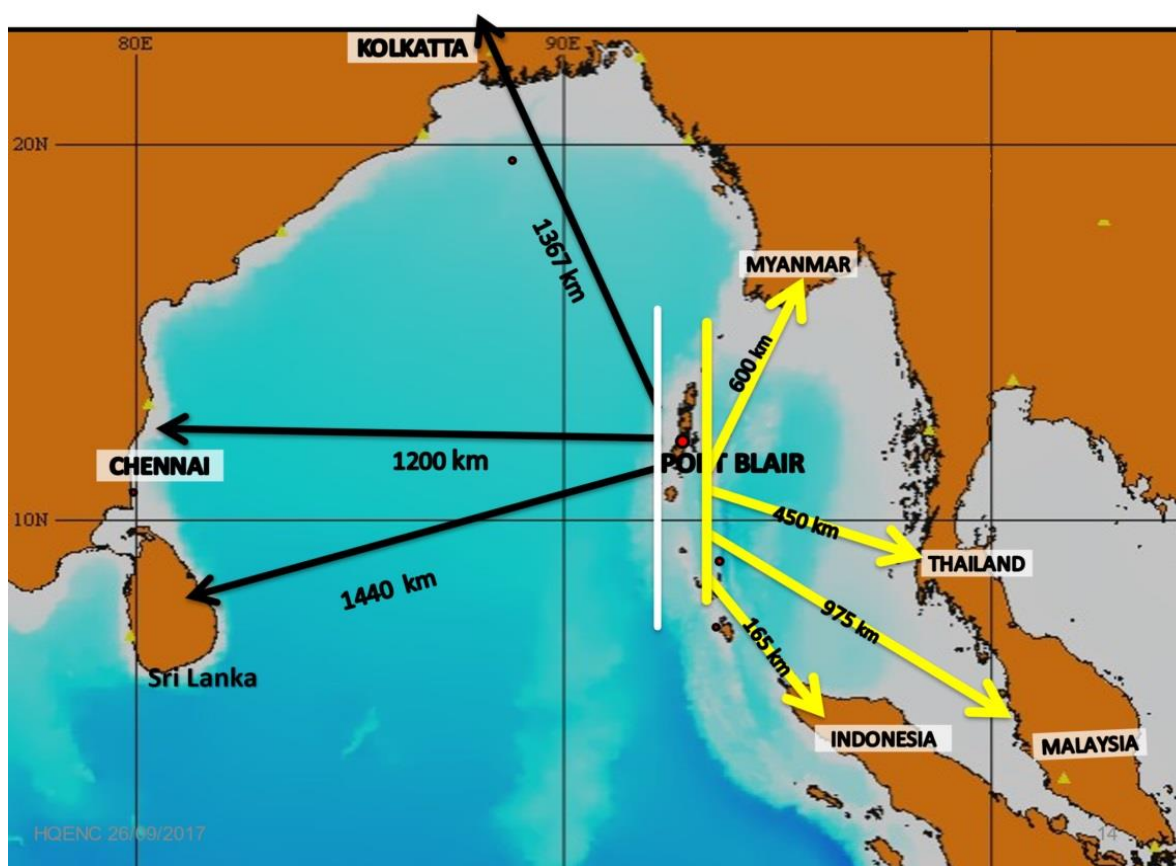
India is a country with 28 states along with 8 union territories. In these union territories, Andaman & Nicobar has its special significance with respect to India's security. Its strategic location makes it crucial for India. Its exclusive economic zone is full of resources which will be helpful in our economic growth.

Geography & Location:

- West- Bay of Bengal
- East- Andaman Sea
- Land area- 8,249 Square km approximately¹
- Coastline-1,962 km²
- Total Islands-836³
- Inhabited Islands-31⁴
- 10 degree channel separates Andaman & Nicobar islands.
- The capital and largest city-Port Blair (officially Sri Vijaya Puram)
- Indira Point-southern part of Great Nicobar as well as southernmost tip of India.

Islands	Area ⁵	District	District Capital
Andaman Islands	6,408 Square km	North & Middle Andaman	Mayabunder
		South Andaman	Port Blair
Nicobar Islands	1,841 Square km	Nicobar	Car Nicobar

Table 1- Briefs about Andaman & Nicobar Islands

Fig 1- Distance of Andaman & Nicobar from various Cities & Countries⁶

Strategic Importance:

The islands have been developed into a key defense establishment since the 1980 due to its strategic location in the Bay of Bengal across the Strait of Malacca⁷⁸ which is one of the world's most important trade route:

- Approximately sixty percent of maritime trade of world passes through it⁹
- Approximately twenty-five percent of oil trade in between Middle East & Rest of Asia occurs through it.
- Approximately eighty percent of oil imports of China pass through this strait.
- Approximately thirty percent of world traded goods pass through it annually.

Andaman & Nicobar Island provide us with closure monitoring of these trade activities and to have a smart move as per requirement of our security.

Economic Importance:

- It is extended Exclusive economic zone of Indian mainland. EEZ around Andaman & Nicobaris around 3000 square km¹⁰.
- It is a source of underwater minerals, hydrocarbon and marine resources.
- Fishing activities are also prominent here.

Importance for Defence:

- The one & only geographical command is located at Andaman & Nicobar which is jointly operated by the Army, the Air Force and the Navy .
- It can act as the first line of defence in case of any attack from the East to shake maritime security of India. This is particularly important in case of China's influence in the Indo-Pacific region.
- It can be developed as regional centre navies to collaborate on counter-piracy, disaster relief, search and rescue, medical aid and many more.
- By developing it according to Hub & spoke model, surrounding countries can strengthen regional security.

Importance for Scientific Research & Innovation:

Only active volcano of India is located on Barren Island. To study about earth, its evolution, its structure, seismic activities on earth can be better studied here.

Challenges:

- Lack of political will: in past it has been not paid attention properly in Indian security policies. In recent time, this mistake has been rectified & due attention has been paid to development of this island.
- Distance from mainland: Being around 1200 km away from mainland India, it is not easy to access it. There are a lot of difficulties in its development.
- Tsunami & seismic activities: On 26 December 2004, the coasts of the Andaman and Nicobar islands experienced 10 m (33 ft) high tsunami waves following an undersea earthquake in the Indian Ocean which resulted in more than 2,000 casualties, 46,000 injuries and rendering at least 40,000 homeless¹¹.
- Environmental Clearance procedure: In many projects environmental clearance procedures create hurdles and cause delay.
- Tribal & forest regulations: Various tribal groups are protected under certain acts. Forest conservation acts also applicable here in strict manner. These also cause problems in development. Lack of coordination among various ministries makes this task very tedious.

Indian Efforts:

- **Increasing Maritime Awareness:** It is necessary to ensure comprehensive awareness of maritime domain and to increase surveillance in these islands. It will be helpful to grow deterrence capabilities in case of any misadventures from the Eastern flank.
- **Infrastructural development:** Developing infrastructure particularly in the southern group of islands to ensure development as well as tourism, it is important to improve transportation & connectivity. Inter-island ferry services can change the picture. Galathea Bay transshipment port can be a game changer on Great Nicobar Island. Submarine Optical Fibre Cable (OFC) which was expected to connect the Andaman & Nicobar Islands to the mainland needs revitalisation. It will be helpful for cheaper & better connectivity.
- **Dependence on mainland India for essential goods and services** needs to be reduced.
- **Increasing Military Presence:** by enhancing military forces and deployment of appropriate assets will help in maintaining island security.
- **International avenues:** we can explore partnerships with the Indo-Pacific Oceans Initiative (IPOI) & Quad for development initiatives.

Conclusion

Being strategically located in Indian Ocean, close to Malacca Strait; Andaman & Nicobar Islands are very important for India. Infrastructure Developments in this island will provide a cutting edge to growth of Indian economy with the help of marine resources. Surveillance & monitoring of trade in Malacca strait will be helpful in security & defence policies as well as actions.

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² *ibid*

³ *ibid*

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¹⁰ [https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/strategic-importance-of-andaman & nicobar-islands](https://www.drishtiias.com/daily-updates/daily-news-analysis/strategic-importance-of-andaman-&-nicobar-islands)

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