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# Disquiet on the Eastern Front — Great Nicobar and India's Maritime Blind Spot

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# Disquiet on the Eastern Front — Great Nicobar and India's Maritime Blind Spot

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## THE EDITORIAL ARGUMENT

India's security discourse remains stubbornly tilted westward — toward Pakistan, the LAC, and the Arabian Sea. The SIPRI 2026 data, released on the same weekend as Andaman & Nicobar's Guinness record celebrations, should prompt a harder question: is India's growing defence budget being invested in the right strategic direction?

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands — sitting 150 km from the northern entrance to the **Malacca Strait**, through which approximately **80% of China's oil imports** flow — represent India's most under-utilised strategic asset. The **Andaman & Nicobar Command (ANC)**, India's only tri-services integrated theatre command, was established in 2001. Twenty-five years later, it remains below the capability threshold needed to serve as a credible deterrent to Chinese naval power projection into the Indian Ocean.

## THE CHINESE CALCULUS

China's naval strategy in the IOR has moved from presence to permanence. The **PLAN** (People's Liberation Army Navy) now has a base in **Djibouti** (since 2017), access agreements in **Gwadar** (Pakistan), **Hambantota** (Sri Lanka leased port), **Kyaukpyu** (Myanmar), and is pursuing influence in the **Maldives** and **Bangladesh**. This is the **String of Pearls** made operational — no longer a think-tank concept but a logistics and intelligence network surrounding India.

India's eastern maritime response has been conceptually articulated (**SAGAR doctrine**, 2015) but operationally thin. The **Great Nicobar Holistic Development Project** — approved by GoI, managed by ANIIDCO — includes a transshipment port, international airport, and **dual-use military facility**. If fully built to specification, it would give India a naval-air base on the tip of the Nicobar chain, 150 km from Malacca. The question is speed of execution.

## WHY GREAT NICOBAR IS STRATEGICALLY NON-NEGOTIABLE

- 1. Malacca chokepoint leverage.** India cannot close the Malacca Strait — that would be an act of war. But a credible military base at Great Nicobar gives India **surveillance, interdiction capability, and deterrent leverage** over Chinese SLOC (Sea Lines of Communication) **vulnerability**. China's PLAN knows this; Chinese commentary has repeatedly flagged the Great Nicobar development with concern.
- 2. Countering Chinese submarine activity.** Chinese nuclear and conventional submarines operate increasingly in the Bay of Bengal and Indian Ocean. A Great Nicobar base — with submarine detection infrastructure (SOSUS-type passive sonar arrays), patrol aircraft, and ASW-equipped surface vessels — could significantly improve India's maritime domain awareness.
- 3. Complements IOR island strategy.** India has developed a **Far Forward Deployment** policy — building infrastructure on **Agaléga** (Mauritius), strengthening ties with **Seychelles, Maldives, Madagascar**. Great Nicobar is the capstone of India's eastern arc.

## THE ENVIRONMENTAL DILEMMA

The Great Nicobar project faces genuine environmental opposition. The **leatherback sea turtle** — largest living sea turtle, critically important ecologically — nests on Great Nicobar's beaches. The project area includes **Galathea Bay Wildlife Sanctuary** and primary tropical rainforest. The **Shompen**, a PVTG (Particularly Vulnerable Tribal Group) of ~300-400 people who have had minimal contact with the outside world, inhabit the island.

These are not trivial concerns. India has international obligations under the **Convention on Biological Diversity** and domestic obligations under the **Scheduled Tribes and Other Traditional Forest Dwellers (Recognition of Forest Rights) Act, 2006**. The National Green Tribunal and Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change are examining the project's environmental clearances.

The editorial is not arguing that environment be bulldozed for strategy. It is arguing that the design reconciliation — between military necessity and ecological protection — must be completed urgently and not allowed to stall the project indefinitely.

## THREE RECOMMENDATIONS

- 1. Accelerate ANC capacity building.** The Andaman & Nicobar Command needs upgraded fighter squadrons (Rafales or Tejas Mk-2), additional submarine support infrastructure, and dedicated ISR (Intelligence, Surveillance, Reconnaissance) assets.

**2. Fast-track Great Nicobar military component.** Even if the civilian transshipment port and township face environmental hearings, the **military airfield and naval facility** – with a smaller footprint – should be prioritised on a separate clearance track.

**3. Invest in Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA).** India’s **Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR)**, established at Gurugram in 2018, needs to be expanded and its real-time data-sharing with partners (US, France, Australia, Japan, Quad partners) upgraded.

## UPSC RELEVANCE

PAPER	ANGLE
GS3 – Internal Security	ANC, maritime security, A2/AD, PLAN in IOR
GS2 – International Relations	String of Pearls, SAGAR doctrine, Quad, Indo-Pacific
GS3 – Environment	Great Nicobar environmental controversy, leatherback turtles, Shompen PVTG

**Mains Keywords:** Great Nicobar Holistic Development Project, Andaman & Nicobar Command (ANC), SAGAR doctrine, String of Pearls, Malacca Strait, Maritime Domain Awareness, IFC-IOR, leatherback sea turtles, Shompen PVTG, ANIIDCO, SLOC (Sea Lines of Communication), PLAN (People’s Liberation Army Navy)

### Prelims Facts Corner

ITEM	FACT
ANC established	2001 – only tri-services theatre command in India
ANC headquarters	Port Blair
Malacca Strait – China oil share	~80% of China’s oil imports pass through
Great Nicobar project	ANIIDCO; transshipment port + airport + township + military facility
SAGAR doctrine	“Security and Growth for All in the Region” – 2015 (PM Modi)
IFC-IOR	Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region; Gurugram; 2018
Shompen	PVTG on Great Nicobar; ~300-400 population; minimal outside contact
PLAN Djibouti base	China’s first overseas military base – since 2017
String of Pearls	China’s strategic network of ports/facilities surrounding India

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