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INDIA'S ANDAMAN AND NICOBAR ISLANDS: ASSESSING THE GAPS BETWEEN THE STRATEGIC LOCATION AND OPERATIONAL CAPABILITY

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**India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Assessing the Gaps between the
Strategic Location and Operational Capability**

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India's Andaman and Nicobar Islands: Assessing the Gaps Between the Strategic Location and Operational Capability



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Abstract

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) hold a significant place in the maritime geography of India. Lying close to the Malacca Strait, they give India access to the eastern Indian Ocean and parts of Southeast Asia. As India becomes more focused on the Indo-Pacific region, there has been more emphasis on the importance of these islands. The creation of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), the development of airfields, naval bases, and strengthening of surveillance and supporting structures are some examples of India's ambitions to operationalise the geographical strength of the islands. However, a favourable location is not enough. The remote location of the islands away from the mainland makes the supply of goods, weapons and troops complicated. In fact, their dispersed geography has led to a lack of established logistics and weak connectivity.

Keywords

Andaman and Nicobar Islands; Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC); Maritime Security; Operational Capability; Strategic Infrastructure; Indo-Pacific; Malacca Strait.

Introduction

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) occupy an important position in India's maritime strategy. Located in the eastern Indian Ocean and close to Southeast Asia, they give India a forward position towards some of the major sea routes linking the Indian Ocean with the wider Indo-Pacific. As maritime security has gained greater importance in India's strategic thinking, the role of the islands has also grown. They are no longer viewed only as a remote island chain but as a location from which India can maintain a presence and respond to developments further east. ¹India's attempt to turn this location into a military advantage began with the establishment of the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) in 2001. It was India's first integrated tri-service command, bringing the Army, Navy and Air Force under a common command structure. ² Since then, military infrastructure has expanded across the islands. INS Baaz in Great Nicobar and INS Kohassa in North Andaman have strengthened India's ability to conduct surveillance, support aircraft operations and maintain a presence across a large maritime area. ³

The development planned under the Great Nicobar Project (GNP), together with a greater emphasis on connectivity and dual-use infrastructure, reflects a wider effort to link the islands more closely with India's economic and strategic interests in the region. ⁴ This expansion, however, also raises a practical question: as more responsibilities and capabilities are placed on the islands, can the existing system sustain them over time?

A strategic location by itself does not create military capability. The value of the ANI depends on whether India can move personnel and equipment between locations, maintain its platforms, provide reliable logistics and communications, and sustain surveillance and other operations over time. The dispersed geography of the islands, limited infrastructure at some locations, airfield constraints, high operating costs and regulatory requirements can all affect this ability. ⁵ This article examines the development of military infrastructure, the existing operational capabilities, and the gaps in developing, upgrading and sustaining military bases and

supporting infrastructure across the islands. Because public information on readiness and deployment is limited, the assessment rests on publicly identifiable capabilities and constraints.

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Recent Developments and the Growing Operational Role of the ANC

In February 2026, the Indian Air Force (IAF) carried out an exercise with the Royal Thai Air Force (RTAF) in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). IAF aircraft flew from airbases in the ANI while Thai Gripens flew from Thailand. The exercise featured Su-30MKI fighter jets and IL-78 mid-air refuelling aircraft with Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) support. It demonstrated the reach and interoperability of the IAF in the IOR and strengthened the growing strategic ties between India and Thailand under the “Act East” Policy. ⁷

During the Offshore Security Coordination Committee meeting in May 2026, the committee took note of the expansion of offshore exploration in the ANI region. The meeting involved the Indian Coast Guard, Indian Navy, Indian Air Force, Ministry of Home Affairs, Ministry of External Affairs, Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, intelligence agencies and State Police forces. The discussion focused on strengthening maritime domain awareness, improving inter-agency coordination, augmenting surveillance capabilities and addressing emerging threats such as unmanned and drone-enabled systems. ⁸

The GNP has added another dimension to the strategic importance of the islands. The Government’s May 2026 backgrounder describes it as a project of strategic, defence and national importance. It will include an International Container Transshipment Terminal, with a capacity of 14.2 million twenty-foot equivalent units (TEU), a greenfield international airport, a 450 megavolt-ampere (MVA) gas-solar power plant and a planned township. The Government states that the project will strengthen India’s presence in the Andaman Sea and Southeast Asia, enhance maritime and defence capabilities, and integrate the islands with global trade and logistics networks. ⁹

Policy Gap: Infrastructure and Operational Capability

India has steadily built its presence in the ANI since the ANC was set up in 2001. Over time, air stations, naval bases, repair facilities and surveillance systems have been established across the islands. In July 2023, the Chief of Defence Staff opened a wet basin and refit jetty at the Naval Ship Repair Yard (NSRY), along with a hangar and dispersal facility at INS Utkrosh. These additions have expanded the Command's infrastructure. They also show that the government is actively improving the Command's capabilities.¹⁰ The limits of this infrastructure are more visible in the islands' airfields. When INS Kohassa was first built, its runway was 1,000 metres long, sized for the operations then envisaged. Later plans call for extending it to 3,000 metres so that larger aircraft can land there.¹¹ A similar plan exists for INS Baaz, whose runway is to be extended to handle more aircraft.¹² These plans show that India wants more than just a presence. The goal is to have the infrastructure that makes that presence effective.

Deciding where and how to use resources is also critical. In the *Arc of Power* series, Air Marshal Saju Balakrishnan, then Commander-in-Chief of the ANC, spoke of the need for airfields and jetties. He also said it was difficult to determine which areas the Command most needed to protect.¹³ This points to a wider lesson: the islands do not need the same facilities everywhere. What matters is having a network of connected bases, each with a defined role and the right support to do its job.

Recent operations show that the existing infrastructure can handle a variety of tasks. The *Arc of Power* documentary, for example, showed a joint-service action involving the Navy, Army, Air Force and Coast Guard near Rutland Island.¹⁴ In February 2026, IAF aircraft also used bases in the islands during the exercise with the RTAF.¹⁵ These events show that the ANC can conduct operations from the islands. The bigger question is whether the same infrastructure can handle long-term operations, especially if work has to happen in many places at the same time.

This distinction is significant. Being able to use a base during an exercise does not mean it can be sustained during a crisis. Sustained activity requires a supply of fuel, spare parts, equipment

and maintenance facilities, accommodation, communications, storage and transport. Sufficient capacity must exist across many locations so that the Command does not rely too heavily on a few large bases.

India is already working on some of these needs. It is lengthening runways, improving jetties and repair facilities, and upgrading communication and surveillance systems.¹⁶ The policy gap, therefore, is not a shortage of facilities. It is about how these facilities are distributed, connected and supported. The greater challenge is to build a network of bases that can work together and support operations across the whole island chain.

The central question of this article is whether India's current and planned military facilities are enough. Can they turn the ANI's locational advantage into long-lasting military power?

Assessing the Operational Constraints

Over the past two decades, military infrastructure in the ANI has progressed a great deal. The additions made in July 2023 at the NSRY and INS Utkrosh have improved the ANC's ability to support air operations within the islands.¹⁷ The challenge is that the needs of the ANC are not limited to a single base. The islands stretch 750 kilometres from north to south, and the operational sites at the northern and southern ends serve different parts of the surrounding sea. The *India Foundation's June 2026* conference report highlights this issue in stark terms. Because the islands are spread out, small and remote settlements need administrative and logistical support, while the ANC must keep military infrastructure working across a wide area. Building and maintaining these facilities more than 1,200 kilometres away from the mainland is costly and difficult.¹⁸

Airfield capacity illustrates this constraint clearly. INS Kohassa began with a 1,000-metre runway, and later plans include extending it to 3,000 metres to allow larger aircraft and more operations.¹⁹ INS Baaz also needs its runway extended step by step so that heavier aircraft can operate from Great Nicobar.²⁰ These are more than construction projects. They determine which aircraft can operate from a site, how far they can travel, and how different parts of the island chain can support one another.

The June 2026 *India Foundation* conference shows that this work is continuing. The report notes that the runway at Shibpur (INS Kohassa) is being extended to a full three thousand metres and that the Campbell Bay runway may also be extended. It also records a goal of building four full-length, dual-use runways along the islands' north-south axis.²¹ If this plan succeeds, the network will reach farther and have backup options. Until then, the ANC's workload stays focused on fewer facilities, which makes their availability and support arrangements more important.

The same problem appears in naval infrastructure. The new basin and refit jetty at the NSRY have boosted local repair capacity, but the need for this investment shows sustain naval operations in a remote island area.²² A ship operating from the islands cannot depend on a berth alone; it also needs fuel, repair, supplies, communications and other support. The longer the support chain, the greater the impact of a delay or breakdown at any single point.

The evidence points to a mixed picture. India has created a military presence in the islands and continues to strengthen it. The ANC can conduct missions, run surveillance and host advanced military activity. Yet key infrastructure is still being built, and the wide spread of the islands keeps putting a load on logistics, movement and support. The main problem is not the absence of infrastructure but the difficulty of building a fully linked, resilient and lasting infrastructure network across the whole archipelago.

Recommendations

Closing the gap requires choices about where to invest, what to build together and how to protect the network from disruption. Each recommendation below also weighs its own limits.

- **Infrastructure should be prioritised by role.** Sri Vijaya Puram (formerly Port Blair) can remain the command and support centre, while Campbell Bay, Car Nicobar and Kohassa should be developed according to the roles that India expects them to perform. This will help direct resources to the locations that matter most for sustained operations.²³ The difficulty is that the role allocation is only as sound as the threat assessment behind it, and the Commander-in-Chief quoted earlier admitted how hard it is to decide which areas most need protection. Roles should therefore be reviewed periodically and

funded in phases. Concentrating functions at a few nodes also creates single points of failure, so each major site should be able to take over essential tasks from another even at reduced capacity.

- **Each major base should be built as a complete operating facility.** Runway and jetty expansion must be paired with fuel storage, maintenance, repair, accommodation and dispersal facilities. The upgrades already completed at the NSRY and INS Utkrosh give India a foundation for this approach.²⁴ Yet a longer runway or a new jetty is an input, not a capability. Progress should be judged by outcomes. How quickly can aircraft and ships be turned around? How long will spares last without resupply? Can power, water and accommodation handle a surge in personnel? Sequencing matters. A runway extended before fuel, maintenance and shelter exist looks impressive. It cannot be used to full effect.
- **Connectivity and redundancy must become part of defence planning.** The islands should have air, sea, road and communication links between operating locations so that a problem at one node does not break the wider network. This matters because the islands face isolation and limited digital redundancy, as the assessments show.²⁵ Redundancy, however, is expensive. Often given up in favour of obvious building projects. It should be considered a design requirement: essential supplies and communications must have at least two separate paths and the network should be tested with exercises that show what happens when a base, a port or a communication line is lost. Dual-use assets, such as airports and ports, can provide extra protection, but their use during a crisis needs to be decided.
- **Local knowledge must be part of infrastructure planning.** Communities that live across the islands know the terrain, weather, sea conditions and access problems better than distant planners can capture. Their participation, with skill training in maintenance, construction, logistics and technical support can strengthen both connectivity and the long-term sustainability of infrastructure. This must be done carefully. Consultation has to be genuine rather than ceremonial and it must respect the regulatory and ecological safeguards that already shape what can be built. Training should also lead to lasting

employment in the maintenance and support ecosystem so that skills remain in the islands.²⁶

Conclusion

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands give India an important spot, but a spot alone does not give power. India has laid the groundwork. A command, bases, runways and repair shops are ready and more are being planned not how many bases we build. It is whether the network can keep aircraft, ships and personnel working across the islands when an operation lasts longer than a drill. Turning geography into capability will rely less on adding new sites. It will rely more on linking, supporting and maintaining the sites India already has.

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