

Why India can no longer afford strategic hesitation in Great Nicobar

India's strategic imagination has for too long remained tethered to the landmass. The subcontinent has traditionally looked inward — towards its borders, rivers, mountains, and electoral geographies — while the waters surrounding it remained politically under-imagined and strategically underutilised. That mindset is now colliding with a rapidly changing global order. The controversy surrounding the Great Nicobar Project is not merely about ecology, tribal rights, or infrastructure development. It is, fundamentally, about whether India is prepared to think like a maritime power in a century increasingly defined by oceans, trade routes, chokepoints, and strategic deterrence.

The debate has therefore been framed too narrowly. The Great Nicobar Island cannot be reduced to a patch of forested territory awaiting development clearances. Nor can it be viewed solely through the familiar binaries that have shaped India's post-Independence developmental discourse: environment versus industry, tribal rights versus state power, or conservation versus capital. Such frameworks, while historically important, are no longer sufficient to explain the geopolitical stakes involved in the Bay of Bengal and the eastern Indian Ocean.

The island is not simply a 1,045 sq. km. landmass at the southern tip of the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago. It is a strategic maritime outpost sitting barely 40 nautical miles from the Malacca Strait — one of the most critical waterways in the world. Nearly one-third of global trade passes through this narrow corridor. Around 29 per cent of global maritime oil flows move through these waters, connecting the energy producers of West Asia with the manufacturing and consumption hubs of East and Southeast Asia. China alone accounts for nearly half the import volumes through the strait. India, too, is increasingly dependent on these sea lanes for both exports and energy security.

In the emerging geopolitics of the Indo-Pacific, geography is destiny once again.

For decades, the Great Nicobar Island remained a silent spectator to one of the busiest maritime passages in the world. That era is ending. The proposed port, airport, township, and power infrastructure represent India's attempt to convert passive geography into active strategic leverage. The island's significance lies not only in its location, but in what that location allows India to become: a consequential maritime actor capable of securing trade flows, projecting power, and safeguarding national interests in an increasingly contested region.

This is why the language around the island has shifted from development rhetoric to military terminology. The description of Great Nicobar as India's "unsinkable aircraft carrier" is not hyperbole. It reflects the strategic thinking now shaping the Indian Ocean theatre. The Andaman and Nicobar Command already sits at the northern end of the island chain. Expanding strategic infrastructure southwards would extend India's operational reach across the entire archipelago, creating a formidable deterrent presence near one of the world's most sensitive chokepoints.

The urgency of such thinking is difficult to ignore. The global order is entering a period of deep instability. Trade routes are no longer neutral spaces; they are instruments of geopolitical influence. Energy corridors are vulnerable to coercion. Technology, finance, shipping, and even supply chains are increasingly weaponised. The Russia-Ukraine conflict, tensions in the South China Sea, instability in West Asia, and the growing rivalry between the United States and China have collectively demonstrated that economics and security can no longer be separated.

India has watched these developments with increasing concern. The Strait of Hormuz has repeatedly reminded the world how vulnerable energy supplies can become during geopolitical crises. The Malacca Strait presents a similar strategic reality for India. Much of India's eastward trade and a growing portion of its energy inflows pass through this route. Any disruption would carry severe economic consequences. In such an environment, strategic passivity is not prudence; it is vulnerability.

This is where the Great Nicobar Project marks a conceptual shift. It signals an India that is slowly moving from continental caution towards maritime ambition.

Predictably, however, the project has reignited the old grammar of protest politics. Environmental groups, activists, sections of the opposition, and civil society organisations have raised concerns regarding deforestation, ecological degradation, and the impact on indigenous communities. These concerns are not frivolous. India's developmental history is filled with examples where displacement, environmental damage, and bureaucratic insensitivity left lasting scars.

From the Narmada Bachao Andolan to the protests in Niyamgiri, Singur, Nandigram, Kudankulam, and Jagatsinghpur, India has repeatedly witnessed the collision between developmental ambition and democratic resistance. Sometimes the state prevailed. Sometimes local communities succeeded in halting projects. In each case, however, the debate revolved around a familiar set of questions: Who benefits from development? Who pays the price? Can economic progress justify ecological or social disruption?

These movements performed an important democratic function. They compelled governments to confront uncomfortable questions about rehabilitation, compensation, environmental accountability, and corporate excesses. They exposed the arrogance of technocratic planning and challenged the assumption that development could simply be imposed from above.

Yet the strategic environment in which India now operates is profoundly different from the one that shaped those earlier movements.

The 20th century's protest vocabulary is struggling to explain the pressures of the 21st century. Security concerns that were once peripheral have become central to statecraft. Governments across the world are recalibrating national priorities in response to geopolitical uncertainty. Infrastructure today is not merely an economic asset; it is strategic architecture. Ports are no longer just commercial gateways. Airports are dual-use facilities. Energy corridors are national security concerns. Islands are military platforms.

The Great Nicobar Project sits squarely within this new reality.

To analyse it solely through the lens of political economy is therefore incomplete. The project is not simply about tourism or commercial expansion. Defence and strategic positioning are the primary drivers. Trade, logistics, tourism, and urbanisation will follow the security architecture, not the other way around.

This distinction matters because it changes the hierarchy of national priorities.

No modern state ignores environmental or tribal concerns, but every state ultimately places national security above all else when strategic vulnerability becomes acute. The United States does so in the Pacific. China does so in the South China Sea. Japan, Australia, and

GREAT NICOBAR: INDIA'S STRATEGIC FRONTIER IN THE INDO-PACIFIC

At the southern tip of India's island chain lies Great Nicobar Island — a critical outpost near the Malacca Strait. More than a development project, it is a cornerstone of India's maritime security, energy resilience and regional role.

WHY GREAT NICOBAR MATTERS

- NEAR THE WORLD'S BUSIEST SEA LANE**
Just 40 nautical miles (74 km) from the Malacca Strait.
- VITAL FOR TRADE & ENERGY**
30% of global trade and 29% of global maritime oil flow through the Strait. China accounts for 48% of its import volumes.
- STRATEGIC DETERRENCE**
Extends the reach of the Andaman & Nicobar Command across the entire 780 km island chain, securing India's eastern maritime approaches.
- GATEWAY TO THE INDO-PACIFIC**
Enhances India's role in a region where a new geopolitical order is taking shape.

THE ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ADVANTAGE

- Wide surveillance over the Bay of Bengal and approaches to Malacca Strait
- Forward operating base for maritime and air assets
- Enhanced ability to deter, monitor and respond

THE GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT: MORE THAN INFRASTRUCTURE

- DEEP-SEA PORT**
Boosts trade, logistics and connectivity
- DUAL-USE AIRPORT**
Civilian use with strategic flexibility
- TOWNSHIP & URBAN INFRASTRUCTURE**
To support population, services and industry
- POWER PLANT**
Energy security for the island and region
- STRATEGIC HUB**
Strengthens India's maritime and defence posture

A PROJECT DRIVEN BY DEFENCE; ENABLING TRADE, TOURISM & OPPORTUNITY

Security is the primary driver. Trade, tourism, education and industry will grow around this strategic core.

LAND USE & TRIBAL PROTECTIONS

Tribal Reserve (existing)	751.07 sq. km.
Project Area	166.10 sq. km.
Within Tribal Reserve Overlap (84.10 sq. km.)	
Revenue land in use since 1972	11.03 sq. km. (13.1%)
De-notified for project	73.07 sq. km.
Re-notified as Tribal Reserve	76.98 sq. km.
Net addition to Tribal Reserve	3.91 sq. km.

The Shompen (237) and Nicobarese (1,094) communities are central to the project. No displacement of tribal people will be permitted.

THE CHALLENGES

- Ecologically fragile island with dense forests, 5 perennial rivers and 25 freshwater streams.
- Located in Seismic Zone V (highest risk). Requires resilient, future-ready planning.
- Limited land (166.10 sq. km.) must support strategic, economic and civilian needs — long term.
- Ensuring tribal participation, livelihood security and cultural protection.
- Balancing modern development with environmental sustainability.

A VOLATILE WORLD. A STRATEGIC RESPONSE.

In an era where trade routes, energy flows and technology are instruments of power, Great Nicobar can be India's bulwark — securing sea lanes, strengthening deterrence, and enabling a larger role in the Indo-Pacific.

A BROADER VISION

- A networked island ecosystem from Landfall Island (North) to Great Nicobar (South).
- Ferry connectivity as logistics arteries and lifelines.
- Aviation network of 5 airports: 2 large (at both ends) and 3 smaller (in between).
- Better access to healthcare, education, supplies and economic opportunities.

THE WAY FORWARD

India must reverse its gaze from land to waters, from rights to security. THE GREAT NICOBAR PROJECT MUST MOVE FORWARD — AT WARP SPEED.

AN AMBITIOUS UPSTANDER, NOT A PASSIVE BYSTANDER. THAT IS THE IMPERATIVE OF OUR TIMES.

BETWEEN ECOLOGY AND GEOPOLITICS

EARTH NEWS POLITICAL DESK