

Why building a port on Great Nicobar Island is in India's supreme national interest

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Great Nicobar, which lies in the south of the islands, is around 144 kilometres from the northwestern tip of Indonesia's Sumatra and overlooks the Straits of Malacca.

Why is Singapore so rich? One of the fundamental reasons is that Singapore understood how to take advantage of its geography. The Port of Singapore, located at the choke point over the Straits of Malacca, is the second busiest in the world. About one-third of global maritime trade passes through these straits, including a third of all the oil that is carried on the high seas.

The trade route connects Europe and West Asia to the coasts of China and Japan in East Asia. In other words, the Straits of Malacca join the Pacific Ocean to the Indian Ocean. The Indian Ocean is supposed to be our zone of influence. So what are we doing about it?

This year, India made a daring move. We have just secured support from Singapore for the Indian Navy to jointly patrol the Straits of Malacca. Did you know that 80 per cent of China's crude oil supply passes through these straits? The Chinese are certainly aware of this. As far back as 2003, then Chinese President Hu Jintao had called it China's "Malacca dilemma".

This is the main reason China is always looking for a toehold in the Indian Ocean. Such as on Coco Island in Myanmar. And if possible, to crowd the Indian Navy out of the Bay of Bengal by reaching out to Bangladesh. Somewhat comically, China does not even seem to like the term 'Indian Ocean'. They have been trying subtly for a while on international forums to get it labelled as the "Asia Pacific".

But now, India is set to do something bigger. Pick up a map and take a close look at the Indian Ocean region. Right at the entrance to the Straits of Malacca, just 170 km from the northern tip of Indonesia, lies Great Nicobar Island. It is here that India is building a vast new transshipment port, as well as an international airport.

This new container terminal will compete with the existing ports of Singapore and Malaysia. The Indian Navy, operating out of the base at Campbell Bay on the same island, will seal India's control over these crucial straits. Now ask yourself: what kind of people would want to stop a project like this?

How big is the container port being built on Great Nicobar Island? Its capacity is supposed to be 14.5 million TEUs (twenty-foot equivalent units). This would immediately put it at par with Hong Kong and among the ten busiest ports in the world. A township is

being built for at least 60,000 people to live and work on the island. Along with a full-fledged international airport. Other countries make millions of dollars bringing tourists from all over the world to island retreats. Why should India miss out?

Of course, a project as large as this will always give rise to concerns. The concerns about the environment need to be taken seriously. But here is the story in simple numbers. The total area that will have to be cleared out for the project is not even 2 per cent of the forest cover of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Surely, this can be made up by planting forests somewhere else in the country, as it should.

And what about the local tribal population on the island and their centuries-old way of life? Again, only 73 square kilometres of tribal land has been set aside for the project. And this will be made up by adding 76 square kilometres elsewhere. In effect, the tribal reserve loses nothing and actually gains a little bit in area.

Besides, presenting development as a 'threat' to tribal populations is a false choice. It is deeply patronising to our fellow Indians who live on these islands. And frankly, somewhat insulting. Our people on these islands want the same things we all do: jobs, growth, and progress. Why are 'activists' presenting people from tribal groups as different from the rest of us?

We have to remember that ports are the way for a country to become a key part of the global supply chain. And ports make a nation rich. When Dubai was developing rapidly in the 1970s, the Sheikh borrowed a lot of money to build their new port. Today, the port of Jebel Ali in Dubai is the ninth busiest in the world. Incidentally, China has 8 out of the top 25 busiest ports in the world, not counting Hong Kong. For comparison, India has just one. It is Mundra Port in Gujarat, owned by the Adani Group. This might be one reason Indian liberals consider Adani to be the worst person in the world.

The control over shipping routes is one of the great drivers of world history. The Suez Canal links the Mediterranean to the Indian Ocean. So when Egypt blocked the Suez in 1956, the Europeans and Israel went to war against Egypt. The US intervened in the Colombian civil war and created an entirely new country called Panama, just so it could build the Panama Canal in 1904.

That would create an ocean route between the eastern and western coasts of the US, as well as link the Atlantic to the Pacific Ocean. Why did Japan attack the United States in World War II? Because the Philippine Islands, controlled by the US, were blocking the route for shipping oil to Japan from its newly acquired colonies in the Dutch East Indies (Indonesia).

Why is the United States the world's biggest superpower? Because whoever rules the oceans also rules the world. Once upon a time, it used to be Britain. If there is an exact date for the end of the British Empire, it has to be February 15, 1942. That is the day the British surrendered the fortress of Singapore to the Japanese. From that day onwards,

Britain was finished as a power on the high seas. And finished as a superpower. We are talking about control of these same Straits of Malacca, where India is building the port on Great Nicobar Island. This is where world history is made.

Significantly, India's own glorious maritime past is also tied up with the Straits of Malacca. The town of Port Blair in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands has recently been renamed Srivijayapuram. The Srivijaya empire was great because it controlled the Straits of Malacca. Also the famous Chola Empire, which held sway over the entire eastern coast of modern India, along with most of the coast of Myanmar, all the way up to these straits between Indonesia and Malaysia.

One of the things that has held India back since independence is land-based thinking. Our neighbours are not just Pakistan, China and Bangladesh. Our real neighbour is the Indian Ocean. And the countries along its rim, stretching from the Horn of Africa, the Gulf countries, and the island nations such as Mauritius and the Maldives to the Straits of Malacca. Our cultural connections in this area run deep. The opportunities for trade are endless.

The idea is simple. To build India, we have to build our ports. Back in 2014, the average time for a ship to turn around from an Indian port was four days. Now it is down to two days. Trade goes hand in hand with diplomacy and national security. India is particularly vulnerable because our northeastern states are landlocked. Their only connection to the rest of India is through the narrow Siliguri corridor, the so-called "chicken's neck".

But in 2023, India opened up a shipping route into Sittwe port in Myanmar, down the Kaladan River that flows out of Mizoram. The Prime Minister of Mauritius has just invited India to provide the vessel carrying him to the Chagos Islands, which were returned to them this year by Britain.

In many ways, the opposition to the Nicobar Island port reminds us of what happened with the Vizhinjam port in Kerala. It was said that the deep sea port would damage the coastline, causing erosion. It was said to be a threat to fishing communities. Local church groups also joined the protests. But now that the port has been built, there is a political battle to take credit for its success. Even the Communists and the Congress insist it was their "dream". That's okay. It's good that these dreams have turned into reality in the Modi-led era.

In the case of the Nicobar port, the usual tussle had been going on for a while. Between the government and the usual crew of NGOs, activists, and those known for filing Public Interest Litigations (PILs). But the matter has taken on a much bigger national dimension ever since Congress leader Sonia Gandhi herself wrote a highly publicised op-ed against it. Something about her piece, its tone and its strident opposition just seemed off. Coming around the time her son and Leader of Opposition in Lok Sabha Rahul Gandhi was rumoured to be in Southeast Asia, it also felt like bad form. Either way, it is time to tell the Indian people why the project is in supreme national interest. We should go ahead and build.

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