

# Shaping Security in India's Maritime East: Role of Andaman & Nicobar

G S Khurana

## Abstract

*Complex and amorphous threats confront India's security environment in its maritime East. India has very high stakes in the Bay of Bengal and its adjoining seas. The confluence of vital sea lines makes this region one of great strategic relevance to other powers as well. This translates into both challenges and opportunities for India. The Andaman & Nicobar archipelago had long been perceived as India's key vulnerability due to its remote location and a history of some of its islands 'slipping away' from the Indian dominion. Such wariness may be unfounded in the present times. Appropriate measures have been taken to strengthen its defence. The island chain can now play a greater role towards securing India's vital interests in the East beyond merely protecting itself. To achieve this, India needs to adopt a two-fold approach – first, augment its intrinsic capabilities, and second, actively engage its maritime neighbours.*

## Introduction

States today encounter a plethora of security challenges linked to the maritime domain. While non-traditional threats are proliferating at an ever-increasing pace, military threats to security even during peacetime continue to exist. Although the stakes are too high to resort to war, major powers continue to compete and seek a favourable balance of power. The new security environment in the maritime sector poses several challenges to India's vital interests. There are also clearly discernible threats to regional stability that have implications for its security.

In recent years, Indian policy-makers have begun to visualise the 'larger security picture' unconstrained by 'static inertia' of the erstwhile continental mindset. The strategic imperative to engage the neighbourhood in the

East was recognised by India after the Cold War ended. New equations with these states have been evident in the politico-economic domain through its initiatives such as the BIMSTEC (Bangladesh-India-Sri Lanka-Thailand Economic Cooperation) and others within its larger 'Look East' policy. Some security bonds have also been established bilaterally and at the regional level (such as within the ASEAN Regional Forum) to address the cross-border character of the emerging threats. It has now become exigent to reinforce these ties due to changing regional security environment.

The Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) archipelago in India's Far East had long been perceived as a key vulnerability, primarily due to it being geographically removed from the mainland (see Fig 1), and a history of it repeatedly 'slipping away' from the Indian dominion, even during the colonial era.<sup>1</sup> In the past few years, appropriate measures have been taken to beef up its defence, including the institution of the integrated Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC). Could the altered geo-strategic vision of Indian policy-makers translate into policies that would enable the A&N chain to play a greater role in securing India's vital interests in the East beyond merely protecting itself?

The article examines the peacetime security threats that India currently encounters in its maritime East. It then attempts to identify the role that the A&N Islands could play to quell these insecurities. Although the national response would necessarily incorporate a seamless interface among all defence services and even non-military disciplines, this article is confined to analysing the maritime-strategic dimensions of security.

### **Maritime Stakes in the East**

#### *'Life-lines' for National Sustenance*

The contemporary global environment is dictated by economics and export-led development. With upto 95 per cent of its trade moving by sea, the sea lines are of vital interest to India for unimpeded flow of its merchandise trade. Presently, India's trade interactions in the East may be lesser relative to those with the West (particularly with the US and the European Union), but is growing at a very rapid pace.<sup>2</sup> The trade with China increased from US\$ 1 billion in 1998 to 13.6 billion in 2004<sup>3</sup> and is expected to reach US\$ 20 billion by 2007 (a 20-fold increase in 10 years).

Indo-ASEAN trade grew from US\$ 7 billion in 1997 to US\$ 13 billion in 2004 and is expected to be US\$ 30 billion by 2007 (an increase by 4.3 times in 10 years).<sup>4</sup> With South Korea the figure was US\$ 5 billion in 2004 and is growing at a similar rate.



Fig-1: India's Maritime East

The trade with Japan is currently worth only about US\$ 4 billion, but it is likely to grow as a result of the recent Indo-Japan strategic engagement and the impetus to realize their immense economic complementarities. India's interest in the eastern sea lines would also increase considerably, particularly after the establishment of regional Free Trade Areas (FTA) that are currently in various stages of negotiations and implementation.

India is presently the sixth largest energy consumer in the world. With its billion plus population and rapidly growing economy, its demand for fossil fuel resources is rapidly increasing. In the next two decades, considering the stagnant domestic production, much of its demand would have to be met through imports. Even if the two overland natural gas pipeline projects in India's West (from Iran) and East (from Bangladesh/Myanmar) materialise, most of the energy imports would continue to be transported via the sea. About 70 per cent of India's oil and natural gas demand is presently met by West Asian suppliers. However, following the

stepped-up efforts to diversify the sources for long-term energy security, some quantity of oil and gas may be sourced from the East, viz., from Russia (Sakhalin), Vietnam and Indonesia. Much of it would traverse the eastern sea lines to reach India. In other words, given India's rising trade and energy stakes, the importance of eastern sea lines and the Southeast Asian straits would grow significantly.

#### *Natural Resource Wealth*

With the realisation of the depleting natural resources on land, states are turning their attention to the sea. The Bay of Bengal is known to hold an immense wealth of such resources in terms of fossil fuels, minerals and fish stocks. The discoveries of huge gas reserves in the Krishna-Godavari basin (first in 2002 and more later) has added to the known potential of the area. The A&N island chain itself is known to bear substantial hydrocarbon reserves. It is only a matter of time that offshore platforms, similar to those at the Bombay High, would sprout in these waters. In order to enable the coastal states to harness living and non-living resources within their adjoining seas in an orderly and equitable manner, the United Nations Convention on the Laws of the Sea, 1982 (UNCLOS-3) bestowed them the jurisdiction of 200 nm of ocean space termed the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). The UNCLOS-3 would also entitle India to extract the resources of the Continental Shelf seabed beyond the EEZ up to 350 nm off the coast once it submits its claims by May 13, 2009.

#### *Andaman & Nicobar Islands*

The significance of the A&N, surprisingly, has been realised only in the past few years. It is an archipelagic chain of 572 islands in the Bay of Bengal, only 36 of which are inhabited. Oriented North-South geographically, the island chain is an extension of the Arakan Yomas submarine mountain range that extends from Myanmar to Indonesia. While its separation from the Indian mainland is as much as 1,200 km, its northern-most part, Landfall Island, is only 18 km from Myanmar's Coco Islands further north. Its southern-most part (Indira Point) is located only about 160 km away from the northern tip of Sumatra (Indonesia).

The A&N contributes about 30 per cent of the EEZ to India's total EEZ area. Its adjoining waters contain various species of untapped marine life that are highly prized as seafood and for a variety of other uses in the

international market. V.S . Somvanshi, the Director-General of *the Fishery Survey of India* has indicated the high potential of economic activity here through export of seafood products to Singapore, which is located only 920 nm from Port Blair.<sup>5</sup> This island chain is also a vast storehouse of timber. Once sufficient infrastructure in these islands is developed with upgraded air and sea links, it could become an attractive trade and investment destination and perhaps, a tourist paradise. Recent press reports indicate that some of these developments are underway.<sup>6</sup> There are also plans to develop Port Blair as an international trade centre and to build an oil terminal and trans-shipment port in Campbell Bay (Great Nicobar) to cater to increasing maritime trade in the region.<sup>7</sup>

#### *Good Order at Sea*

India's interests also lie in what mariners call 'good order at sea'. Maritime disorder could be the handiwork either of non-state criminal elements or could be the result of natural causes. What may be the state interests in peril? As subsequently analysed, it could be linked to India's internal security; or threats to mercantile shipping and human lives at sea and in the littoral; and could even flow from degradation in the environment with attendant immediate ill-effects on marine life that have long-term consequences.

### **The Security Challenges**

#### *The Insecurity Triad*

Most of the non-state security challenges encountered by India in the maritime East essentially rest on a 'tripod', the three legs of which have strong connections via the 'watery medium'. In temporal order, the first leg is the historic infamy of the Southeast Asian waters on account of maritime piracy that has not only continued into the modern times, but has also spilled over into the Bay of Bengal. The second leg is formed by the internal instabilities linked to centrifugal tendencies of sub-state groups operating within India's north-eastern states and in the neighbouring littorals (Sri Lanka, Myanmar, southern Thailand, Sri Lanka, Aceh in Indonesia and southern Philippines). The rise of militant Islamic fundamentalism forms the third leg of regional insecurities. Jemmah Islamiyah (JI), the offshoot of Al Qaida in Southeast Asia, seeks to carve out a pan-Islamic state in the Muslim-dominated areas of the sub-region.

The Jamat-e-Islami and other fundamentalist groups are also known to operate from Bangladesh, where disorder and ineffective state control provides a fertile breeding ground.<sup>8</sup> It is widely believed that these groups are provided support by Pakistan's Inter Services Intelligence (ISI) operatives against India. The following provides a closer examination of the insecurity triad and its implications.

Piracy: Most incidents of violence against ships (commonly referred to as piracy) have been occurring within the territorial waters and legally termed 'Armed Robberies against ships'. Hence, only the concerned coastal state can exercise jurisdiction over such acts, as opposed to piracy at high seas, wherein all states can interdict and prosecute the criminals. Although such attacks are also frequent off the Indian and Bangladesh coasts, those in the vicinity of Sumatra face more serious challenges since these directly imperil the vital sea line passing through the six-degree channel and the Malacca Straits.

The early 2005 report of the International Maritime Bureau (IMB) indicated that although the number of pirate attacks had declined globally in 2004, the insecurity in the hot-spots like the Malacca Straits/Indonesian waters had increased.<sup>9</sup> The report noted the use of sophisticated weapons, increased violence, better planning and greater coordination on part of the criminals. The mid-2005 report for the first half of the year has confirmed this trend and noted that the Indonesian waters accounted for one-third of the global piracy figures.<sup>10</sup> The Malacca Straits witnessed no pirate attack in the first two months of 2005, a phenomenon that was incorrectly attributed to the destruction of pirate hideouts as a result of the Tsunami in December 2004. The surge of violence that has occurred since end-February 2005<sup>11</sup> has more than compensated for the earlier lull.

Most of the pirate attacks/hijackings of vessels today are the handiwork of criminal gangs for 'private' gains, but in many cases, insurgent groups have been resorting to it for 'political' motives. In August 1998, the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE), hijacked *Princess Kash*, a Belize-flagged vessel for its cargo of cement that was needed to build bunkers, tunnels and other underground infrastructure. The Sri Lankan Air Force bombed it to prevent the LTTE from seizing the cargo.<sup>12</sup> The rebels of the Free Aceh Movement in Indonesia have often targeted vessels off the coast of Sumatra carrying natural resource commodities such as oil, tin and aluminium. Such attacks have a dual aim - firstly, to avenge the denial (by

the Indonesian government) of their “rightful” access to natural resources of their province; and secondly, selling the commodities in the black market helps them to generate funds for their operations.<sup>13</sup> The insurgents have also been carrying out hijackings and taking the crew hostage, either to demand ransom or release of their companions in government custody.

Insurgencies: The insurgency in Aceh province of Indonesia has immense potential to directly impinge on India’s security. First, the acts of piracy/ hijackings by Acehnese rebels, threaten the sea lines off the coast of Sumatra, including the six-degree channel. Second, considering the proximity of Aceh province (and to an extent, that of southern Thailand) to A&N, it is possible that the insurgent groups operating there could use the topography of these islands to their advantage or as a temporary refuge to regroup. The undulating and thickly forested terrain of A&N, added to the widely scattered spread of the 572 islands would make it extremely difficult for the maritime security and law enforcement agencies to detect such intrusions.

The common threads binding the insurgencies also have adverse implications for India. The ‘Golden Triangle’ comprising Myanmar, Thailand and Laos, which is the eastern core of global drug production, acts as the principal connection. All movements are nourished by narco-trafficking via the sea with the help of criminal syndicates in a complex web of ‘symbiotic’ relationships. The shipment of drugs to Western markets is undertaken by the LTTE which owns about 12 commercial ships registered in states providing Flags-of-Convenience. The cash generated from the sale is used to buy small arms in Cambodia, where they are available in plenty at low prices, left over from conflicts of the past. The port of Ranong in Thailand is the hub of the clandestine arms market. From here, the weapons are shipped to the coasts of countries infested with terrorism and insurgencies, including Bangladesh and Myanmar. From there, the militants in India’s Northeast receive these arms over land routes. The revelations of the 1998 operations *Leech* and *Poorab*,<sup>14</sup> confirmed these connections. It also emerged that some islands in the A&N chain are used as transit halts for the small boats ferrying weapons via the Andaman Sea. On many occasions, Bangladesh has seized fishing vessels in the process of dumping arms on its coast. In 1997, the Royal Thai Navy also intercepted arms off Ranong meant for the insurgents in Manipur. Many other trans-national links have also been unearthed, some of which are as follows:

- The LTTE's operations are reinforced by its international network of significant Tamil diaspora abroad, including in Thailand. A half-built LTTE midget submarine was discovered in Phuket in 2000.<sup>15</sup>
- Though they do not have the blessings of Beijing and Yangon, some undercover organisations in China's Yunan province are known to ship the PLA arms surplus on barges and mechanised craft to insurgents in India's Northeast via the Irrawady river.<sup>16</sup>
- The LTTE has been reportedly training separatists in India's Northeast.<sup>17</sup> The insurgents in Aceh have trained with their counterparts in southern Philippines<sup>18</sup>

The possibilities of intangible connections also exist. The 'island hopping' tactics employed by the Abu Sayyaf in southern Philippines to obtain arms from Borneo are very similar to those employed by the insurgents in India's Northeast and Myanmar. Seven Myanmar nationals were arrested in March 2005 by Thai authorities for hijacking two vessels.<sup>19</sup> They could be Myanmar insurgents inspired by their counterparts in Indonesia and Sri Lanka. The major question is: Have the insurgent groups been 'exchanging notes'? Greater anxieties stem from the possibility of other insurgent groups imbibing the successful tactics of the LTTE, just as an LTTE leader had claimed to have mimicked the October 2000 attack on *USS Cole*.<sup>20</sup> Is it possible that the LTTE's known expertise in underwater operations influenced the Abu Sayyaf when the latter kidnapped scuba-diving specialists to train their members?<sup>21</sup> If the answer to any of the above questions is in the affirmative, these could be the forerunners of maritime terrorism in the sub-region.

Maritime Terrorism: Despite the maritime configuration of Southern Asia, its insurgent groups have rarely resorted to attacks at sea since the effect-effort ratio was low. The very few cases include the attacks by the LTTE's Sea Tigers on Sri Lankan naval vessels and the one in February 2004, where the Abu Sayyaf bombed a passenger ship, *Super Ferry 14* in which more than 100 people were killed.<sup>22</sup>

However, security analysts are now increasingly realizing the imminence of maritime terrorism as the links of some insurgencies with global terrorism is becoming clearer. Besides, the effect-effort ratio may be 'progressively' increasing owing to the growing economic interdependence of states on account of globalisation and the vulnerabilities of trade and energy flows in terms of choke-points, reliance on a few hub-ports and

the permeability of the shipping industry.<sup>23</sup> The only other manifested ingredient for maritime terror is nautical expertise to carry out these attacks, which may be provided by the rampant sea-borne criminal activity in maritime Southeast Asia, particularly piracy. It is feared that terrorists may either learn the essentials of ship-handling from the pirates to hijack a vessel, or even lure them with economic incentives to do the job.

The vital Malacca and Singapore Straits are widely believed to be the most threatened by an attack by terrorists who may scuttle a hijacked super-tanker or gas-carrier in the waterway to block it. The tremendous vulnerability of the Straits may be gauged by the fact that navigating a vessel through the waterway is a mariner's nightmare. It is only about 1.2 nautical miles wide at its narrowest and barely 25 m deep at its shallowest. Some stretches are lined with numerous shoals, shipwrecks and shallow patches. It is congested with dense mercantile traffic, fishing activity and country boats. Besides, the Straits have important hub-ports like Singapore and Tanjung Pelepas, which could be attacked using ships laden with dangerous cargo. Some experts have even expressed anxieties of a radiological attack in the Straits.<sup>24</sup> This is an extension of one of the key threats to global security today, viz., the potential proliferation of weapons of mass destruction (WMD) to terrorist groups.

The economic and other attendant ramifications of such attacks would be global and catastrophic. This can be gauged by the fact that the classification of the Malacca Straits as a war-risk zone on June 20, 2005 by the Lloyd's Market Association<sup>25</sup> has itself invited overwhelming protests from the maritime community due to increase in cost of shipping insurance, which would adversely affect the economic growth of developing states.<sup>26</sup> Besides, the repercussions of a terrorist attack would also be accompanied by ill-effects to the marine environment of the littoral coasts, including possibly the Nicobar Islands.

#### *Malacca Straits: Recent Developments*

The insecurity in the Malacca Straits has further aggravated in the past few years owing to the inadequacy of the littorals' security and law-enforcement mechanism. The limited patrol assets of the states have neither adequate endurance nor integral helicopters and are grossly insufficient to patrol the Straits, especially considering their additional responsibilities for surveillance of the extensive maritime zones.<sup>27</sup> However, Indonesia and

Malaysia have been vehemently opposed to any external involvement in the Straits, stating that these are their territorial waters wherein security is their prerogative.

In April 2004, the US launched the Regional Maritime Security Initiative (RMSI) for the Malacca Straits. The plan was to deploy US Special Forces on high-speed vessels. Indonesia and Malaysia rejected the initiative. The official reason given was that it would impinge upon their sovereignty, and rightly so, in terms of international law. But there were other reasons too. The most important being the fact that the predominantly Islamic population in these states has never appreciated the US 'heavy-handed' military approach to terrorism and its 'monolithic' view of Islam. Besides, the RMSI was not intended to help littorals to combat all maritime crimes in a holistic manner.

The RMSI and international pressure from other states has led the Straits littorals to take some measures such as the tri-lateral coordinated patrols called MALSINDO, instituted in July 2004. However, this has also proved ineffective in curbing piracy, even as a deterrent. After the two-month lull following the Tsunami, the pirate attacks have resumed with renewed vigour.

Thailand is expected to join the MALSINDO soon.<sup>28</sup> Though during the ARF summit in July 2004, the Straits littorals had gauged the readiness of India to provide security assistance, no formal request has been made by them so far. *Evidently, Indonesia and Malaysia are trying to avoid the involvement of more states in 'their' domain till they can.*

#### *Other Non-Traditional Threats*

The A&N Islands have been attracting foreign vessels that illegally fish in its waters, particularly those from the neighbouring Southeast Asian littorals. The 'fetch' from these waters, which abound in varied species of seafood and other marine organisms, is sold back home at very high prices. The easy availability of hi-tech nautical equipment in these countries (radar, refrigeration plants and GPS) miniaturised for small boats, facilitates evasion, endurance and precise navigation. This could have been checked to an extent if the local fishing industry was developed with the fishermen seeking deep-sea catches and not confining themselves to traditional non-mechanised means of fishing. Poaching by foreign fishermen, if unchecked,

could lead to depletion of fish stock and ecological imbalance, besides their attendant security implications.

Another major challenge for the A&N Islands is to check illegal immigration. The immigrants are mainly shipped from Bangladesh, Myanmar and Sri Lanka (Tamils). While the demographic characteristics of these islands make it easy for these 'outsiders' to merge with the local populace in the short term, it eventually leads to socio-economic tensions, criminal activity and polarisation of society on communal lines. There are also apprehensions of the ISI and LTTE infiltrating these groups for subversive activities. Such a threat from human trafficking poses a daunting challenge – if such transfers are not interdicted at sea, it would become extremely difficult to take corrective measures later, since the humanitarian angle has always been a major consideration to deal with the problem.

The Bay of Bengal is also highly susceptible to nature's fury. While cyclones are as frequent as two to four in a year<sup>29</sup> and cause much devastation in the sea and littoral, the Tsunami conveyed that maritime disasters of even greater magnitude are possible. The attendant environmental degradation is another cause for concern. The A&N area has a fragile ecosystem. Seventy per cent of the oil in the Persian Gulf is routed through waters close to the A&N. Despite global measures towards safety of shipping and specific regulations for oil tankers, these maritime disasters could lead to upsetting the ecological balance through oil spills or destruction of marine life. Oil spill pollution could also be caused by non-state acts of violence against shipping or accidents due to human errors.

### **State Threats**

The probability of India encountering a direct military threat from one of its immediate neighbours is extremely low at this point. However, an extra-littoral intervention in the Bay of Bengal could gravely undermine India's security. The probability of this occurring is very high, particularly from the Chinese Navy in future. Beijing is primarily driven by the need to secure its energy sea lines, not only to counter non-state threats, but also to attenuate the strategic 'control' of its potential adversaries (US and India) on its energy 'lifelines'.

To facilitate its plans, China has been engaging the littorals. Besides various forms of defence cooperation, it is assisting Bangladesh to develop

the Chittagong harbour. It has also been assisting Myanmar to construct naval bases, radar and electronic-intelligence stations and airstrips dispersed across the entire Burmese coast.<sup>30</sup> The Haingyi naval base is reportedly designed to support Chinese nuclear submarines if Myanmar so desires. Assistance is also being rendered for building port infrastructure, including in the Great Coco Island, much of which has military applications and could be made accessible to the PLA Navy as a quid pro quo. The projected 800-mile Irrawady river-road link connecting Yunan to the Bay of Bengal, is envisaged as the logistics backup for Chinese assets operating here.<sup>31</sup>

A foray into the Bay of Bengal/Indian Ocean is also intended to meet China's other objectives beyond the energy-security issue. It could be aimed at checking New Delhi's rising influence here. More importantly, it would secure its southern flank against Washington in case of a war in the West Pacific (Taiwan or the South China Sea). This translates into the imminent 'new Cold War' in the West Pacific spilling over to the Bay of Bengal, with attendant grave implications for India.

An intervention could also be in the form of clandestine intelligence-gathering activities by foreign vessels, either during their passage through Indian waters or in the guise of fishing. In October 2004, the trawler *Yu Man Shing* with a predominantly Chinese crew was seized off the A&N Islands.<sup>32</sup> Notwithstanding the attractiveness of A&N waters to foreign fishermen, it is most unlikely that the Chinese had ventured as far as 2000 nm for 'illegal fishing'. Besides, the available evidence indicated the possibility of the vessel being engaged in an oceanographic survey for submarine operations. This is not an isolated case – in August 1994, the Indian Coast Guard captured three mysterious Chinese trawlers off the Narcondam Island with charts showing hydrographic details of the area, one of which was equipped with electronic equipment.<sup>33</sup> In early June 2002, the local press even reported the sighting of a Pakistani submarine off Campbell Bay (the report however could not be confirmed).<sup>34</sup>

### **The A&N: Looking Beyond Vulnerabilities**

*ANC: The First Milestone!*

The Andaman ANC was created in October 2001 with its headquarters at Port Blair. Its Area of Responsibility (AOR) roughly comprises:

- The Longitude extending south from the land border between Bangladesh and Myanmar (western limit),
- The beginning of the Malacca Straits or Longitude 100 degree East (eastern limit), and
- The Equator (southern limit).

Under the direct control of the Chairman of the Chiefs of Staff Committee, the ANC has the distinction of being India's first integrated command, incorporating all defence services (including the Coast Guard). Although the ANC Charter did include protection of sea lines and surveillance of the EEZ, it was more oriented towards 'territorial defence' of the A&N,<sup>35</sup> possibly due to the perceived vulnerability of the island chain. (Of course, the ANC was, in effect, also a 'laboratory' to evolve an indigenous model towards the theatre command concept for possible implementation in the future).

Securing the widely scattered islands of the A&N was always an arduous task. Besides, the newly instituted ANC had very limited policing assets at its disposal. However, the force levels were progressively augmented. The induction of the four Fast Attack Craft (FAC) made a significant contribution, since their high speed compensated to an extent, the extensive spread of the island chain. The incidents of poaching by foreign fishermen saw a significant decline – the apprehension figures of 64 boats and 646 poachers in 2000 came down to 38 and 271 respectively in 2002.<sup>36</sup> With the acquisition of the Israeli Unmanned Aerial Vehicles (UAV) in 2002, maritime surveillance has further improved. These UAVs also proved useful to locate the Tsunami victims.<sup>37</sup>

India's acquisition of power projection capabilities in the mid-1980s had caused many anxieties among the neighbouring Southeast Asian littorals. Although the formation of the ANC could have generated a similar response, all fears were allayed through naval diplomacy. The biennial congregation of regional navies at Port Blair initiated in 1995 and called *Milan* was one of these measures at transparency, confidence-building and professional engagement, an event that actually had greater significance for the littoral navies after the formation of ANC.

*Beyond the ANC Charter!*

The great distance of the A&N from the Indian mainland vis-à-vis Southeast Asia that has hitherto been considered India's vulnerability, could be translated into strategic advantages. It provides defence-in-depth by extending India's security perimeter outwards by more than 700 nm. This would serve to forewarn and even ward off a possible extra-regional intervention in the East. On the other hand, the proximity of these islands to Southeast Asia could yield immense dividends. It would facilitate the engagement of the extended neighbourhood by realising the politico-diplomatic role of navies to build confidence and foster inter-operability for joint operations with the maritime neighbours. Concurrently, it would help India to keep abreast of the politico-military developments in the sub-region (including those related to the extra-regional powers), which have a direct bearing on India's national security.

The geographic disposition of the island chain also makes it a frontier to secure vital sea lines since it creates a series of choke points – the Coco Channel in the north, the ten-degree channel between the Andaman & Nicobar Island groups, and most importantly, the six-degree channel. The former two waterways are used relatively less by commercial shipping. However, the entire global shipping passing through the Malacca Straits must cross the six-degree channel. The southern part of the island chain is therefore geographically well placed even to play a security role in the Malacca Straits. This was validated in 2002, when the naval Offshore Patrol Vessels (OPVs) operating from Port Blair/Campbell Bay, successfully carried out the escort mission for the US high-value vessels transiting the Straits. This advantage can also be extrapolated to the useful role that India can play to stem the proliferation of WMDs, in case it decides to participate in the Proliferation Security Initiative (PSI), towards which, India is “gradually moving forward”.<sup>38</sup>

The Island chain's centrality in the Bay of Bengal, coupled to its extensive 450 nm north-south spread could be used to advantage for enabling greater domain awareness. This would help countering the rapidly proliferating non-traditional maritime threats in the area and maintaining good order at sea.

India responded well to the Tsunami disaster in the Indian Ocean on December 26, 2004, providing succour simultaneously to the Indian coasts

and islands as well as to the neighbouring littorals, Indonesia, Sri Lanka and Maldives. This proved the capability and capacity of the Indian armed forces for undertaking such large-scale disaster-relief operations. However, the acclaim that the armed forces earned was predominantly due to the quick reaction and rapid mobilisation that they accomplished. Hence, in an exigency of this kind, where time matters much, the geographic centrality of the A&N is also a tremendous advantage for India in terms of 'time-and-space' to respond to a crisis in the Bay of Bengal and its littoral. This would have been true even for the recent Tsunami relief operations, had the destruction not been so widespread as to affect the A&N itself.

### **The Way Ahead**

Owing to its close links with many insurgent movements, the activities of the LTTE need to be watched and related information shared with the concerned littoral states. The surveillance and intelligence infrastructure in the A&N could be employed for this purpose since a substantial portion of the LTTE's covert mercantile activity occurs in proximate waters.

The six-degree channel and its proximate waters need to be secured. Although India's ongoing coordinated naval patrol with Indonesia along the common maritime boundary is a step in the right direction, the insurgency in Aceh would also require closer monitoring in order to gauge any change in the security scenario after the peace accord.

If and when the political decision is taken in conjunction with a request from the Malacca Straits littorals, the forward operating base (FOB) at Campbell Bay could be used for naval/Coast Guard security operations in the waterway. Despite their aversion to any external security role, Indonesia and Malaysia have recently (in July 2005) made a significant statement that air surveillance by other states would be welcomed if the aircraft are controlled by the littorals.<sup>39</sup> India could consider offering its assets, viz., the Dornier aircraft based at Port Blair. This would also serve as a goodwill gesture and reinforce confidence. However, owing to the indispensability of surface assets to interdict and confirm the identity of suspect vessels, patrolling assistance of other states may become inescapable in the future, particularly if the security situation deteriorates. Without pushing for a security role in the Malacca Straits, the following points must be conveyed to the Straits littorals through Track Two channels and informal discussions:

- India's increasing stakes in the vital waterway and the way instability in the neighbourhood directly impinges on its security.
- India's operational involvement in the security of the Straits would only take place if requested by the littorals and would have no linkage to the US initiatives such as RMSI.
- Their sensitivities over sovereignty issues would be taken care of. Various options in that direction need to be explored, one of which could be to have the IN or Indian Coast Guard vessels patrolling the Straits with law-enforcement officials of the littoral states embarked onboard.

The imperative to build 'bridges of friendship' with the maritime neighbours in the East cannot be over-emphasised. Of particular importance is the need to engage Myanmar and Bangladesh, where China's influence is growing. This would also serve to enhance India's naval presence in the northern Bay of Bengal. India's interactions with Myanmar are on the rise, particularly in terms of port calls by warships, reciprocal visits by senior officials and defence sales. Recently, the Myanmar government even "expressed its keenness to deepen the Indian involvement for its shipbuilding know-how and maritime expertise".<sup>40</sup>

In order to prevent illegal fishing and immigration in A&N by foreigners, agreements for coordinated patrols with Myanmar (and Bangladesh) could be considered on similar lines as those with Indonesia and Thailand. Efforts also need to be made to develop the fishing industry. This would serve as 'human intelligence' and supplement these operations.

Although the maritime surveillance and policing capability of A&N has lately been improved considerably particularly after the induction of UAVs and the FACs, it needs further augmentation. A radar network across the island chain linked real-time to the Joint Operations Centre at Port Blair needs to be put on the fast track. Larger patrol vessels with integral-air capability need to be based in A&N, not the least for a possible operational role in the Malacca Straits in the future. Greater speed and firepower of these vessels would also be necessary to cater for the increasing intensity of threats from piracy and maritime terrorism. In addition, adequate defence and deterrence for A&N also requires urgent consideration. Anti-submarine Warfare (ASW), air-defence and anti-ship missile-capable platforms need to be based probably at Port Blair, while re-basing the policing assets to the northern and southern parts. For this,

it would be necessary to upgrade the technical and logistics support infrastructure accordingly. Ports and airfields would also need to be developed in other parts of A&N to support permanent basing of assets. In order to improve the response to natural disasters, the sealift and airlift capacities would have to be augmented. Some of the new Landing Ship Tanks (Large) (LST-L) being inducted need to be based in the A&N.

Considering that the preservation of marine life is vital both for attractiveness of these islands in terms of tourism, and for maintaining the ecological balance for sustaining fish stocks, the oil-spill response capability in A&N Islands is inadequate. It has been very appropriate that a specialised 2,000-tonne pollution-control vessel is earmarked for A&N among the three ordered by the Coast Guard.

The process of diplomacy, through the *Milan*, of regional navies at Port Blair must continue and could be expanded in scope to include other navies and even the Coast Guard. The defence industry is a vital element of such diplomacy. The occasion could be utilised to showcase India's indigenous warships and weapons through exhibitions by Indian shipyards and the DRDO.

## **Conclusion**

Until a few years back, in keeping with the prevailing global security paradigm, 'territoriality' was in the forefront of India's perception of external security. This probably explains the erstwhile wariness and insecurity of the Indian political leadership with regard to the geographically distant A&N Islands. However, with the worldwide focus on economics for national development, even inter-state territorial disputes have been relegated to the background. Contentions over the Islands (in connection with maritime claims) do persist, but the Bay of Bengal is relatively tranquil in this regard and any thought of a neighbouring state staking claim to the A&N may be safely dismissed as absurd.

With the global security environment having undergone a major transformation in recent times, non-traditional threats form a major subset of India's security calculus in its maritime East. Added to these, are the threats posed by states, even in peacetime. With the stakes too high to resort to war, an extra-regional state could coerce India through soft power (backed by military capability) to achieve its interests and a favourable balance of power. These complex and amorphous security challenges

necessitate a rework of strategy and mobilisation of suitable assets on the part the Indian policy-makers.

The response could adopt a two-fold approach – firstly, building intrinsic capabilities in the A&N to counter threats within its designated areas of responsibility, and secondly, fostering security bonds with the maritime neighbours to jointly combat common threats and maintain the power balance. The A&N has immense strategic value even to achieve the latter. The Islands could be used as a springboard for engagement of the eastern neighbourhood, in conjunction with the politico-diplomatic role of the Navy. This would also facilitate building political trust and reinforcing economic ties. Diplomacy and confidence-building would however, have to be underpinned by ‘appropriate’ and ‘credible’ military power at the disposal of the ANC.

#### References/End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In 1942, the Japanese captured them from the British without a fight. In March 1981, a Burmese Naval Gunboat landed troops on Narkondum Island. In 1985, a community of Thai fishermen were evicted from Tillanchang Island.
- <sup>2</sup> Swati Lodh Kundu, “Asian surge in India Trade”, *Asia Times Online*, May 28, 2005 at [http://atimes.com/atimes/South\\_Asia/GE28Df01.html](http://atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/GE28Df01.html) (Accessed July 29, 2005)
- <sup>3</sup> “India’s trade with China touches \$13.6 billion”, The Information Company Pvt. Ltd website, February 7, 2005 at [http://www.domain-b.com/economy/governance/20050207\\_trade.html](http://www.domain-b.com/economy/governance/20050207_trade.html) (Accessed July 29, 2005)
- <sup>4</sup> C.S. Kuppaswamy, “ASEAN Economy - Dominated by China?”, *South Asia Analysis Group*, Paper 1184, December 10, 2004 at <http://www.saag.org/papers12/paper1184.html> (Accessed July 29, 2005)
- <sup>5</sup> V.S. Somvanshi, “Archipelagos within the Indian EEZ – Geographical Advantages and Opportunities for Fisheries Development”, *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies*, 12 (2), August 2004, pp.344-345
- <sup>6</sup> Sourav Sanyal, “Meanwhile, Port Blair for a Future with Phuket”, *Indian Express*, July 25, 2005 at [http://www.indianexpress.com/full\\_story.php?content\\_id=75059](http://www.indianexpress.com/full_story.php?content_id=75059) (Accessed July 29, 2005)
- <sup>7</sup> D. Sivaram, “Geo-Strategic Implications of Sethusamudram”, *Tamilnation* website, October 6, 2004 at <http://www.tamilnation.org/forum/sivaram/041006.htm> (Accessed 20 August 20, 2005)
- <sup>8</sup> Chandan Nandy, “Indonesian Jihadis Get Refuge in Bangladesh”, *Hindustan Times*, March 31, 2003
- <sup>9</sup> “Global ship piracy down, but Malacca Strait worsens”, Reuters, London, February 07, 2005 at <http://www.hindustantimes.com/news/>

- 181\_1232169,00020008.htm (Accessed August 05, 2005)
- <sup>10</sup> "IMB report finds piracy declining", *Global Piracy Watch*, Statement issued by IMB on July 19, 2005 at <http://www.cargosecurityinternational.com/channeldetail.asp?cid=9&caid=5222> (Accessed August 05, 2005)
- <sup>11</sup> "Violence resumes in Malacca Straits", *ICC Commercial Crime Services Report*, Kuala Lumpur, March 15, 2005 at <http://www.icc-ccs.org/main/news.php?newsid=42> (Accessed May 02, 2005)
- <sup>12</sup> Rohan Gunaratna, "Trends in Maritime Terrorism - The Sri Lankan Case", *Lanka Outlook*, Autumn 1998 at <http://www.is.lk/is/spot/sp0316/clip8.html> (Accessed March 09, 2005)
- <sup>13</sup> Jamie Shutzer, "Piracy in Indonesia", November 30, 2003 at <http://www.sais-jhu.edu/bwelsh/JamiePolicyPaper.pdf> (Accessed August 19, 2005) While the process of reconciliation between the Aceh rebels and the Indonesian government is underway, it may be too early to speculate an end to the 30-year-old insurgency.
- <sup>14</sup> "Myanmar offered arms for lending a helping hand" *Hindustan Times*, September 12, 1998 at <http://www.ibiblio.org/obl/reg.burma/archives/199809/msg00419.html> (Accessed August 20, 2005)
- <sup>15</sup> Ashok Mehta, "LTTE Conundrum", *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies*, 8 (1&2), August 2000, p.142
- <sup>16</sup> Jaideep Saikia, "Imperilled Frontiers: India's Northeast" , in Satish Kumar (Ed.) *India's National Security: Annual Review 2004*, India Research Press, New Delhi, 2005, p. 262
- <sup>17</sup> "LTTE Training NE Separatists", *Defence Digest*, 4 (2), Sep-Oct 2004, p. 56
- <sup>18</sup> Dana R. Dillon, "Southeast Asia and the Brotherhood of Terrorism", Lecture No. 860, The Heritage Foundation, December 20, 2004 at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/AsiaandthePacific/hl860.cfm> (Accessed August 20, 2005)
- <sup>19</sup> "Thai authorities arrest hijacked tug and barge", statement issued by IMB on March 17, 2004 at <http://www.cargosecurityinternational.com/channeldetail.asp?cid=9&caid=2272> (Accessed August 20, 2005)
- <sup>20</sup> Eric Koo, "Tides of terror lap Southeast Asia", *Asia Times Online*, October 20, 2004 at [http://atimes01.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast\\_Asia/FJ20Ae02.html](http://atimes01.atimes.com/atimes/Southeast_Asia/FJ20Ae02.html) (Accessed August 20, 2005)
- <sup>21</sup> Robert Mangindaan, "Maritime Terrorist Threat: An Indonesian Perspective", Paper presented at Workshop on Maritime Counter-Terrorism organised by the Observer Research Foundation (ORF), November 29-30, 2004
- <sup>22</sup> Arlyn de la Cruz, "We bombed ferry, claims Abu Sayyaf", *The Nation*, March 01, 2004 at [http://www.inq7.net/nat/2004/mar/01/nat\\_4-1.htm](http://www.inq7.net/nat/2004/mar/01/nat_4-1.htm) (Accessed August 20, 2005)
- <sup>23</sup> G.S. Khurana, "Maritime Terrorism in Southern Asia: Addressing the Precursors", *Indian Defence Review*, 20 (1), Jan-Mar 2005, p. 60

- <sup>24</sup> C.S. Kuppuswamy, "Straits of Malacca: Security Implications", South Asia Analysis Group Paper 1033, June 18, 2004 at <http://www.saag.org/papers11/paper1033.html> (Accessed August 19, 2005)
- <sup>25</sup> List issued by the Lloyd's Joint War Committee (JWC) at <http://www.the-lma.com/docimages/5292.pdf> (Accessed August 19, 2005)
- <sup>26</sup> T. Selva, "Straits a Terrorism-risk Area", Star Publications (Malaysia) at <http://thestar.com.my/maritime/story.asp?file=/2005/7/11/maritime/11427310&sec=maritime>
- <sup>27</sup> G.S. Khurana, "Malacca Strait Security: Is Extra-Littoral Naval Response Exigent?", *Indian Defence Review*, 19 (3), Jul-Sep 2004, p.21
- <sup>28</sup> Tiarma Siboro, "Thailand may join Malacca Strait Patrols", *The Jakarta Post*, August 9, 2005 at [http://www.indonesianembassy.org.uk/announcement\\_2005\\_08\\_09\\_jp\\_1.html](http://www.indonesianembassy.org.uk/announcement_2005_08_09_jp_1.html)
- <sup>29</sup> *The Bay of Bengal Pilot (Sailing Directions)*, 1978
- <sup>30</sup> Mohan Malik, "China's Strategy of Containing India", *India Defence*, February 6, 2006 at <http://www.india-defence.com/reports/1308> (Accessed March 21, 2006)
- <sup>31</sup> Thomas Kane, *Chinese Grand Strategy and Maritime Power*, Frank Cass Publishers, London 2002, pp.127-128
- <sup>32</sup> V.K. Shashikumar, "Beware of the Dragon", *Tehelka*, New Delhi, December 18, 2004, p.5
- <sup>33</sup> Swaran Singh, "China's Indian Ocean Policy", *Journal of Indian Ocean Studies*, 8 (1&2), August 2000, pp.76-77
- <sup>34</sup> VAdm (now Adm) Arun Prakash, "Evolution of ANC and Defence of Island Territories", *USI Journal*, 133 (551), Jan-Mar 2003, pp.29-30
- <sup>35</sup> The principal roles and functions allotted to the ANC were: (a) Defence of the territorial integrity, waters and airspace of the islands, (b) Ensuring that eastern approaches to the Indian Ocean remain free from threats for unhindered passage of shipping, (c) Monitoring of SLOCs in designated areas of responsibility (AOR), (d) Exercising surveillance over EEZ, (e) Establishment of an air defence and identification zone (ADIZ) for air defence and air space control, and (f) Undertaking joint planning for contingencies and infrastructure planning. See, VAdm (now Adm) Arun Prakash, *Ibid.*, pp.31-32
- <sup>36</sup> Prakash Nanda, "Strategic Significance of the Andamans", *Bharat Rakshak Monitor* 5(3) November-December 2002 at <http://www.bharat-rakshak.com/MONITOR/ISSUE5-3/nanda.html>
- <sup>37</sup> Barbara Opall-Rome, "India Uses Israeli UAVs To Locate Tsunami Victims", *C4SIR Journal*, January 03, 2005 at <http://www.c4sirjournal.com/story.php?F=580988> (Accessed March 05, 2005)
- <sup>38</sup> As per Robert Joseph, the US Under Secretary of State for Arms Control and International Security, Patrick Goodenough, "Anti-Proliferation Initiative Holds

Major Stop-and-Search Drill in Asia”, *CNN News*, August 17, 2005 at <http://www.cnn.com/ViewForeignBureaus.asp?Page=%5CForeignBureaus%5Carchive%5C200508%5CFOR20050817a.html> (Accessed March 29, 2006)

<sup>39</sup> Sean Yoong, “Air patrols set for Straits of Malacca”, *The Standard*, August 3, 2005 at <http://www.thestandard.com.hk/stdn/std/World/GH03Wd08.html> (Accessed March 29, 2006)

<sup>40</sup> Shiv Aroor, “Fleet expansion in mind, Myanmar looks to India for expertise”, *Indian Express*, January 13, 2006 at [http://www.indianexpress.com/full\\_story.php?content\\_id=85841](http://www.indianexpress.com/full_story.php?content_id=85841) (Accessed March 29, 2006)

G S Khurana is a Commander in the Indian Navy and a Research Fellow at IDSA.

### **Matin Zuberi (1930-2006)**

We deeply mourn the death of Prof. Matin Zuberi, a longstanding contributor to the *Strategic Analysis*, former member of the IDSA's Executive Council and friend of the Institute.