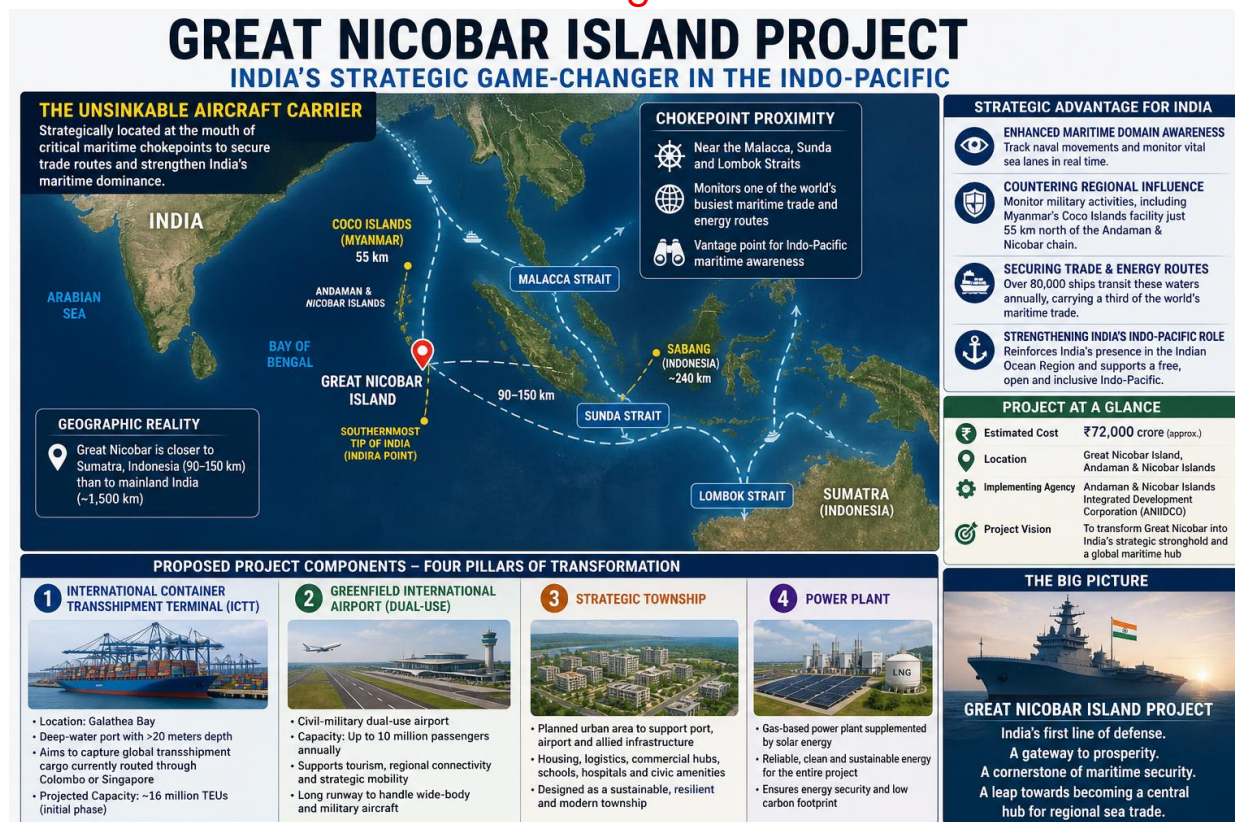


The Great Nicobar Pivot – Securing India's Eastern Frontier.



Introduction

As India approaches the first anniversary of Operation Sindhoor, the national discourse remains heavily focused on past military triumphs in the West. However, strategic experts argue that "non-stop jubilation over the past is unwise" and that India must urgently shift its strategic gaze from the Western borders with Pakistan to the Eastern Seaboard. The evolving geopolitics of the Bay of Bengal, coupled with China's increasing maritime footprint, necessitates a robust defensive phalanx in the East.

The Necessity – Shifting the Gaze from West to East

Historically, India's military posture has been "instinctively" focused on the North (China) and West (Pakistan). Most key operational assets of the Army and Air Force, and even the Navy, look toward Pakistan. While this focus is valid, the 3,416-km eastern seaboard is becoming increasingly vulnerable.

The Munir Factor – In August 2025, Pakistan's Field Marshal Asim Munir suggested that future conflicts might start from the East, targeting India's "most valuable resources" located along the eastern coast.

Neglected Frontier – Psychologically, India has maintained a "benign view" of the East, leaving big metros and industrial zones exposed to potential naval threats.

Sensitivities and the China Factor

The security architecture of the Bay of Bengal is being reshaped by the "chaos" in neighbouring nations and ambitious infrastructure projects.

The Isthmus of Kra Canal – A long-standing proposal to dig a canal across Thailand's Isthmus of Kra could cut sailing time from the Pacific to the Andaman Sea by three days. If built with Chinese help or ownership, it would undermine the Malacca Strait's status as a choke point and bring the Chinese Navy alarmingly close to India's buzzing eastern coast.

Myanmar's Great Coco Island – Located just 20 km from India's Landfall Island, this Myanmar territory already hosts a 7,500-foot airstrip. Reports of Chinese visits to these islands suggest a potential Chinese foothold right at India's doorstep.

Regional Vulnerability – Both Bangladesh and Myanmar are increasingly vulnerable to Chinese strategic presence, necessitating a forward defensive shield.

The Great Nicobar Project – India's "Unsinkable Aircraft Carrier"

Geography has gifted India the Andaman and Nicobar Islands, which act as natural "unsinkable aircraft carriers". The Great Nicobar Project is a multipurpose initiative designed to leverage this strategic capital.

Salient Features of the Project

Transshipment Port – A massive multipurpose township-cum-transshipment port intended to handle global shipping traffic.

Military Integration – Primarily functioning as a huge military base capable of harbouring ships, submarines, and reconnaissance aircraft.

Muscle Power – Building the intervention capability to monitor and, if necessary, act upon shipping passing through the **Six Degree Channel**, which lies within India's Exclusive Economic Zone.

Significance – Beyond the Malacca Dilemma

While there is "heady talk" of the Quad and India's ability to "choke" China in the Strait of Malacca, such a move is diplomatically risky as it would hinder friend and foe alike, including Japan and South Korea.

Forward Defensive Shield – Great Nicobar is better viewed as India's "forward defensive shield," serving the East as the Himalayas serve the North.

Monitoring Capability – The project gives India the presence to watch everything moving in and out of the Malacca Strait.

Deterrence – By militarizing the islands, India shores up its maritime defences against the prospect of Chinese proactive maneuvers in the Indian Ocean over the next 10–15 years.

Conclusion

Serious nations draw lessons from past conflicts but focus their resources on the battles that lie ahead. India cannot afford to remain complacent regarding its eastern frontier. Militarizing the Andaman and Nicobar archipelago is not just a policy choice but an indispensable defensive phalanx. To protect what it "values most," India must anticipate future threats on the eastern seaboard and continue adding "muscle and eyes" to its southernmost territories.

GS Mains Practice Question

"The strategic significance of the Great Nicobar Project extends beyond the 'Malacca Dilemma' to serve as India's forward defensive shield in the East. Critically analyze this statement in light of emerging maritime threats in the Bay of Bengal."

Context – Mention the strategic shift from West to East and the lapse of focus on the eastern seaboard.

Threat Assessment – Discuss the Coco Islands (Myanmar) and the potential Isthmus of Kra canal (Thailand) as facilitators for Chinese naval presence.

Project Utility – Highlight the role of Great Nicobar in monitoring the Six Degree Channel and providing a deep-water transshipment hub.

Conclusion – Emphasize strategic autonomy and the necessity of anticipating future wars rather than obsessing over past air skirmishes.

Preliminary Practice question.

Question – With reference to the strategic geography of India's eastern maritime frontier and the Great Nicobar Project, consider the following statements –

1. The Great Nicobar Island is situated near the Six Degree Channel, which serves as a vital maritime passage for global shipping entering the Malacca Strait.
2. Myanmar's Great Coco Island, located north of the Andaman archipelago, has developed an airstrip that is currently longer than the one built at Great Nicobar.

3. The proposed Kra Canal across the Isthmus of Kra in Thailand is intended to enhance the strategic significance of the Malacca Strait as a global choke point.
4. The Great Nicobar Project includes the development of a multipurpose transshipment port that also serves as a forward defensive military shield.

Which of the statements given above are correct?

- A) 1 and 3 only
- B) 2 and 4 only
- C) 1, 2, and 4 only
- D) 1, 2, 3, and 4

Answer and Explanation

Correct Answer – C) 1, 2, and 4 only

Detailed Explanation –

Statement 1 is Correct – Any shipping going in and out of the Malacca Strait must pass through the Six Degree Channel, which falls within India's Exclusive Economic Zone near Great Nicobar.

Statement 2 is Correct – Myanmar's Great Coco Island, situated only 20 km from India's Landfall Island, features a 7,500-foot airstrip, which is currently longer than the infrastructure built at Great Nicobar.

Statement 3 is Incorrect – The proposed Kra Canal across the Isthmus of Kra would actually **undermine** the significance of the Malacca Strait by providing a shorter alternative route (saving about three days of sailing time) from the Pacific to the Andaman Sea.

Statement 4 is Correct – The Great Nicobar Project is designed as a multipurpose township-cum-transshipment port that doubles as a critical military base, acting as a forward defensive shield for India's eastern seaboard.

Significance

This question tests a candidate's understanding of "Geography – Features and Locations" and "International Relations – Strategic Projects." Understanding the shift from a Western-centric defense focus to a balanced maritime strategy in the East is essential for analyzing India's future security challenges.