



NAUTICAL GAMES: THE GREAT NICOBAR ISLAND PROJECT (PART I)

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On the same day President Trump lamented on [Truth Social](#) that “we have lost India and Russia to deepest, darkest China,” Singapore’s Prime Minister Lawrence Wong, on official visit to New Delhi, [appreciated India’s interest](#) in joint naval patrols in the strategic Malacca Strait—highlighting the enduring nature of China-India rivalry shaping Asia’s future.

This came close on the heels of announcement of [India’s multi-billion-dollar project](#) to build a transshipment port, airport, power plant, and township on the Great Nicobar Island (GNI)—located astride the busy Malacca Strait—thereby underscoring intent to leverage geography for strategic advantage. The Strait provides the shortest sea route between the Middle East and East Asia. It gives New Delhi a strategic perch over the Six Degree Channel, the narrow passage through which up to 60% of global trade and most of China’s energy imports flow. The Andaman and Nicobar chain of 572 islands (ANI), stretching from Myanmar to Sumatra, serves as India’s natural maritime fortress, with Great Nicobar offering New Delhi a forward base between the South China Sea and northern Indian Ocean. By developing

the island chain, India aims both to counter China’s naval expansion and to transform Great Nicobar into “India’s [Singapore](#),” a growth hub for the Bay of Bengal and a pivot in its Indo-Pacific strategy.

Playing politics with geopolitics

However, as is often the case with most mega-projects in India, the \$9.6 billion Great Nicobar project has also become embroiled in controversy. Congress leader Sonia Gandhi has denounced it as a “[planned misadventure](#),” citing the trampling of tribal rights, environmental destruction, and legal bypasses. Critics warn of damage to coral reefs, sea turtle nesting grounds, and the displacement of the Shompen tribe. Yet Congress’s opposition takes on a deeper significance when viewed against the party’s still-secret 2008 MoU with the Chinese Communist Party, signed in the presence of Xi Jinping. Going by the CCP’s MoUs elsewhere, that pact likely bound both parties to consult and avoid actions detrimental to the other’s strategic interests—fueling speculation that Congress’s stance may align, intentionally or not, with China’s strategic interests. At its core, the debate pits ecological survival against geopolitical goals. For its part, the ruling Bhartiya Janata Party frames the project as a strategic imperative: an unsinkable aircraft carrier at the mouth of the Malacca Strait, vital for India’s naval reach, power projection, and Indo-Pacific posture, dismissing Congress’s opposition as obstructionist at best, and at worst, inadvertently advancing Beijing’s regional ambitions.

Ground zero

The Bay of Bengal and the Malacca Strait are indeed the ground zero in [India–China maritime rivalry](#). Encounters between their navies in the Indian Ocean are becoming more frequent. Beijing sees the Great Nicobar project as a threat—extending India’s naval and economic reach in the eastern Indian Ocean and challenging Beijing’s bid for regional dominance. Chinese research and fishing vessels have been mapping the seabed for submarine deployments in the Indian Ocean. In 2019, the Indian Navy expelled a [Chinese research ship](#) operating near the Andaman Islands. In neighboring Myanmar, India’s development of Sittwe port and China’s construction

of Kyaukphyu port illustrate the intensifying contest for strategic footholds. The littoral states of the Bay of Bengal now find themselves increasingly entangled in the rivalry between Asia's rising powers.

This maritime rivalry must be seen against the backdrop of China's expanding naval ambitions. Chairman Xi Jinping envisions sea power as central to restoring China's "rightful place" in the world. With over 370 warships and submarines, China now possesses the [world's largest navy](#), eroding U.S. predominance at sea. Having consolidated its hold over the South China Sea by militarizing artificial islands, China's navy has now set its sights on the Indian Ocean. As China's economic interests have grown, so has its military presence in the Indian Ocean. Over the past decade, China has maintained a [continuous presence](#) of 10–12 warships, submarines, and research vessels on average.

China's Indian Ocean

Chinese strategists wax lyrical about resurrecting Admiral Zheng He's 15th-century expeditions to the "Western Ocean" (the old name for the Indian Ocean). Beijing's cultivation of friendly, pliant regimes along the Indian Ocean littorals through economic inducements and strategic pressure mirrors the Ming dynasty's past attempts to control the trade routes by altering political regimes in Malacca, Sumatra, and Sri Lanka so as to facilitate commercial and political dominance. Retired [Rear Adm. Yin Zhuo](#) advocates building "at least five to six aircraft carriers" to maintain "two carrier strike groups in the West Pacific Ocean and two in the Indian Ocean." At the same time, American strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan's theories of sea power inform [China's Belt and Road Initiative](#), aimed at securing overseas markets, resources, and bases. Beijing has poured investment into ports in Cambodia, Thailand, Myanmar, Bangladesh, and Sri Lanka, while projecting an even [stronger naval presence](#) across the western Indian Ocean—from the Maldives and Pakistan to Djibouti and Africa's east coast—positioning itself astride critical maritime chokepoints. By securing port access, conducting anti-piracy patrols, and supplying military hardware to littoral states, China is steadily entrenching itself as a "[resident power](#)" in the Indian Ocean. The launch of

the China–Indian Ocean Forum in 2022, notably excluding India, underscores Beijing's determination to shape regional dynamics without accommodating its southern rival.

Part II in this series will explore the consequences of these developments, and offer recommendations.

PacNet commentaries and responses represent the views of the respective authors. Alternative viewpoints are always welcomed and encouraged.