



THE CENTRE FOR SECURITY STUDIES



# STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

ONLINE LECTURE SERIES  
WITH  
AIR MARSHAL PK ROY

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SATURDAY

30 OCT

2021

11:30 AM

## SPEAKER BIO



Air Marshal PK Roy (Retd) PVSM AVSM VM VSM is a helicopter pilot with over 4500 hrs of flying experience over 40 years of distinguished service. Important appointments held by him include Command of units and stations, Senior Officer-in-charge Administration and Assistant Chief of the Air Staff (Personnel Airmen and Civilian).

The Air Marshal was appointed the Commander-in-Chief of Andaman Nicobar Command and has also served as the Military and Air Attaché in the Indian Embassy at Ukraine with accreditation to Romania. He is a graduate of Defence Services Staff College, Higher Air Command Course and alumni of National Defence College, New Delhi.

Air Marshal Roy superannuated on 31 May 2014. Post retirement, he has authored the book "Strategic Vision -2030 for Security and Development of Andaman and Nicobar Islands" along with Commodore Aspi Cawasji.

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# THE STRATEGIC IMPORTANCE OF ANDAMAN & NICOBAR ISLANDS

## About the Event

On the 30th of October, 2021, Air Marshal PK Roy (Retd) delivered an informative and interactive lecture on the “Strategic importance of Andaman and Nicobar Islands” under the Centre for Security Studies online lecture series. The lecture was mainly focused on the holistic strategic importance of the island in addition to detailed thoughts on its potential. Air Marshal PK Roy from his rich experiences from the islands, emphasised for using the potential of the islands with hand in hand to the sustainability that will help the nation in fostering its extended arm of defence. At the end of the discussions he also talked about his policy recommendation for the developing strategic importance of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. The discussion also touched key issues like those of Chinese dominance and the international security environment.

## Highlights and Insights

Air Marshal PK Roy commenced the discussion with a detailed analysis of the present international security environment, for which he picked out important dynamics of the security environment and analysed each factor. This was discussed from the position of China and India in the pre-World War period to threats that made by pandemic of Covid 19. Here he also gave special importance to key dynamics in the Asia-Pacific and Indian Ocean Region.

After the comprehensive discussion on the security environment, respected PK Roy also made a detailed analysis on the economy of the Indian Ocean Region by considering each factor. Then the seminar was driven to understanding the security environment of the Indian Ocean Region. In this part discussion went through the key points of instability in littorals, spill over and marine dominance. In addition, India's stronghold in the area was discussed.

Then the focal point of the lecture - the strategic position of Andaman and Nicobar Islands (ANI) - was discussed where the respected Air Marshal explained to the participants the geography and nature of the islands from his rich experience on the field. A detailed explanation on the northern and southern groups of islands was given in addition to factual

information of the change in Indira point. In addition, the geographical aspects of the Island groups were also explained. Then the general information of the island was shared to the participants, which included information about forest, economy, infrastructure, industries and tourism.

One of the key assertions of the lecture was then presented - the need for infrastructural development. Air Marshal PK Roy elucidated the need for development in sustainable mode as a result of a proper scientific study on the same by removing the pretence of security. He shared with the participants his insights on the hurdles that are faced by islanders and forces in the island. He also pointed out the need of new port facilities in addition to the development of the present port facilities that can help in increasing trade and investment in the island.

Through this lecture the respected Air marshal also gave the participants an understanding about the Andaman and Nicobar Command. Roles and responsibilities, capability, capacity, and efficiency of the command were discussed under the same. Further the strength, weakness, threats and opportunities of the island were discussed in order to derive the strategic importance of the island. In strengths of ANI, the main focus was on the strategic position of the island in trade, function as an agent to Act East Policy and the dominance of India's position in the Indian Ocean region to this extended chain for security. The weaknesses of the islands were discussed, particularly on the main points of isolation and congestion that is made in Port Blair with all development and plans into it.

Before the conclusion, Air Marshal PK Roy also put forward a policy proposal for Andaman and Nicobar Islands with specific demarcation of policies for infrastructure, environment, engagement with littorals, economic development, air link, ports, and communication in addition to the broad policy recommendations. In conclusion he emphasised the imperative position of the islands in the 21st century world security environment.

### **Question and Answer Session**

In addition to the key lecture by Air Marshal PK Roy, he also actively participated in the question and answer section where the participants came up with queries and opinions on the same. Here are some of the questions raised by the lecture's attendees.

***Q. "India is an alternate heavyweight against China". How credible is this statement given we are 1/5th of Chinese Economy and our defence expenditure is 1/3rd of Chinese military budget (even here majority of our expenditure is towards revenue expenditure and dedicated to the army leaving Air force and Navy crunched for funds)? The conflict with China has again pushed us to prioritise land over maritime security. In this light, how can we be considered an alternative heavyweight in the Indian Ocean?***

Mentioning India as an alternative heavyweight to China may not be correct. Both the countries are developing, China is developing much faster than us. We, as I said, are in catch up mode. So we will leave that part. If you look at the second part of the question, it is much more relevant to today's topic. If you look historically, the Indian Ocean region has been always important for us for our trade, economic development, and the spread of Indian culture. But unfortunately it was lost because of our attention being directed northwards. Continuing issues in the north have again created more focus on that area. But today India is not losing sight of the Indian ocean region. Naval forces have been given, in fact, more importance than the other two branches, not to say that others are not being given any importance. The Navy is progressing. The Navy has a big advantage of the establishment of the ship building organisation with the involvement of their own offices and the help of retired admirals. From the drawing phase onwards the headquarters is involved in every ship. So please don't think that we are not giving due importance to the Indian ocean region, but yes the media will talk in a northward view. The Navy is a silent service and it is moving in the right direction as of now.

***Q. What are your views on the Andaman development plan for the "the Sustainable Development of Little Andaman Island Vision Document" by NITI Aayog.***

That is the big advantage that we have in this government. Sustainable development is the basic requirement of any development. Ad hoc development, or scanning things ad hoc, does not function which has been the rule till now. If you look at the document in its entirety, you will realise that they are talking about the comprehensive plan which I spoke about developing these islands. In fact, you have a vision document, in fact you have a full-fledged document available for the development of the entire island. And look at the way they have gone about it. Today we have people retire from service who then serve in the Island development authority and then become the administrative head of the island. The government has a clear plan for developing the island through these visions today. And through NITI Aayog, through these experts in the

field, they are pushing it. And while I am confident, it will take time. We need to be patient and need to be focused and continue forward.

*Q. Sir you mentioned the need to balance between the strategic and environmental concerns? How can we possibly achieve that in the case of Andaman and Nicobar Islands especially since some of the indigenous population does not want to develop and integrated into the mainland culture and way of life?*

When I say a need to do a scientific study to find a balance this is what a study will do what you are saying. To give you examples, sentinel islands they want to, let them be. The study is to clearly indicate if these islands, sentinel islands should not be touched and they are not being touched. They will not be touched; I can assure you. But then the study when it moves down from there to the Jarawa tribe area it has to take decision, whether 1000 sq.km of forest should be reserved for 400 Jarawa tribes. The study must look at the pockets where Jarawa tribes are staying in this 1000 sq.km, study must look at migration within the area, study might look at their habit and habitats and various aspects and identify certain positions in which can be developed without affecting them. But to an extent, we may look at more towards development no. 1000sq.km for this, whereas Jarawas are really enjoying the main facility provided for them in Port Blair, I don't know if you know G.B Pant hospital, they have an entire floor reserved for Jarawas they can come anytime get the treatment and go, and they come, they know this is for us. They move in, get treatment and then walk back into the jungle. So when you do a scientific study with local involvement these things will emerge. So that is what when we talk about scientific balancing of the environment with strategic requirements. We don't want to do what happened in the US on other islands. We don't have to push everybody out and erase the entire island and construct only military access there, no sir, we are different. So that is what I mean when I say, there might be many like sentinel islands who will not agree to development plans. Yes, if they do its good, even today by the way we provide them with it. We have contacted people who are known to them who go and provide whatever is required and come back. I am not saying we should force them to give up everything and come into the mainstream, but that is also a major discussion. Do we let them be where they are when the world has gone ahead so much? There are other reasons for their change over from the present environment where there will be a large number of issues like physiological or medical issues. That is why we use scientific study.

***Q. My question is regarding the relevance of ANI in the development of submarine communication cables, because they form an important part of India's global cyberspace communications. But our problem is logistical mobilization in case there is a cable break - have we been able to utilize the strategic location of these Islands in rapid response to such breaks? If so, how?***

Entire submarine cables around the world will have this problem. This is not isolated to Andaman; within our own main land we have different types of connectivity. Our IT people work with the US through these submarine cables so the system exists, it has to be translated or transported on to this between mainland and islands and it is there. It cannot mean that it is without such a facility available we will lay the cable. So there is no, nothing to fear about a cable getting cut unintentionally or intentionally by somebody, cables would get cut due to natural disasters, and provisions and procedures exist to repair these. Standby systems exist, so we should not have fear of having 12000km of submarine cables. We are talking about submarine cables from here across the globe to the US and others.

***Q. How is India planning to counter Chinese presence from Indo Pacific near ANI. Is there a plan of action or a so-called white paper currently in place? Also, what is your opinion on AUKUS. Although India is supporting it now, will it be a threat to the ANI islands in future?***

China is far ahead in its economic and military development, that's the bottom line. China is well ahead as it processes much faster than us. It's a different type of government, a different type of country, its procedures and way of functioning is different, which can't be implemented in India. India is a democracy or functioning democracy, a step further which could be hindrance in many of the strategic decisions as well today. China is constructing warships in such a fast way where we are not able to catch up, which is a fact, our resource availability has to be divided between the western sector, eastern sector and extended eastern sector to the Andaman's. So we have resources, but not necessarily the type of resources we want. So today I am sure that you must have read, is from open book, we have evolved a system of mission based deployment. When you don't have resources, what you do, even within your family when you don't have resources, you do a study what to prioritise and do your expenditure accordingly. So in mission based deployment, a study is carried out on which are the areas that are vulnerable, which are the areas that demand immediate attention, things are prioritised and groupings are made based on the mission, based on the requirement of that area, deployment

is done and then rotated. All the way from China, if one sends their ships here, they must have logistics plans to support them. To maintain them deployed here is difficult otherwise. That is why, you may have noticed looking at what I said String of Pearls, influencing countries, bring ships to Sri Lanka, trying to act alone in anti-piracy missions, it is tiring. Let's see what it can do.

***Q. Sir, I remember reading an article where an idea was floated that, once theaterisation has been achieved, the ANC, due to its being the most integrated service, could be taken as a core to form a new expeditionary force. I feel that if we are to become a major power, we must further develop expeditionary capabilities to be able to project our power further. What are your views on this matter sir? How can we exploit the high degree of integration in the ANC?***

ANC is being developed as an expeditionary force, when you read in the newspaper you must look at this source. This could be ideas of the writer, is the author giving his views, is the author talking on source based input who would not like to have an expeditionary force? But the question should be “do we have the capability in terms of resources as of now?” So what the sequence of action would be first equip ourselves to guard our own country and that does not mean that we just restrict ourselves to mainland, these islands will be expanding outwards and slowly as in when we had resources those things can be spoken of. But to expect it to be done in the next 10 years itself. And joint command is working fine there where tremendous issues to the extend the land was held by different services – but all that is over now. Major changes have to be brought since event procurements are centralised. Tremendous problems were there and more over now CDS coming in everything is given to him and he allocates ANC. Today till date our jointness is at planning stage, entire mission used to be planned jointly. Now moving ahead where we want to have joined commands because of resources, better coordination, better utilisation. And difficulties will always be there.

***Q. Keeping in mind the Act-East policy with an intention to have a strengthened economic cooperation with East Asian nations, can it be assumed that A&NI might play a critical role as a linkage for the same? And if so, can it be said that the A&NI is capable enough to withhold such ambitions of New Delhi? And if not, what should be the immediate plan of action from India. Also keeping in mind the geopolitical importance of the islands, is it possible to strength the military power on the Island by cooperating with other friendly nation? (In order to fast forward the process of countering Chinese presence in the region?)***

We are cooperating tremendously with neighbouring countries. We have a system known as coordinated patrolling. We do coordinated patrolling with Indonesia, Malaysia, Myanmar and Bangladesh. Almost every month the ships and air assets are doing patrolling of the zone for any activity, any poaching activity, illegal immigration and various things. Exercises being conducted. The aim is for Port Blair to act as a checkpoint for every shipment that traverses through southeast Asia. Tremendous interaction will happen, but no country will attempt to base their forces there. We don't have these interests. As for the Act East policy, the aim is that, it should be that. Container transshipment ports will be a major component of that. Tourism would be a major component of that, when we start having civil aircrafts flying to south east Asian countries through Port Blair it will become a major component, that means we will be able to take passengers from Port Blair or to Port Blair, and then continue to southeast Asian countries. The aim is to involve these islands in our Act East policy, but tremendous work has to be done, it is a long process as I said we have miles to go.

***Q. Does India's soft power has the potential for economic development and bringing it closer to the mainland population? Are there policies in place which support such soft power development and economic development in ANI?***

**A.** If you look at Indian soft power historically all over Southeast Asia you have Indian influence. Indian culture and soft power has been very active in this region. What we need to do is to exploit it, but instead it has been neglected. I see it happening regularly in the present tenure of the government. There is no doubt that soft power will play, you cannot have hard power one way all the time, it will not bear fruits for long. It will not be easily accepted by the people. Ultimately it will be soft power along with a bit of hard power which will help you influence people. Hard power not be used for long as we have seen from Syria and Afghanistan, there has to be a mix of two, and much more of soft power to influence people. Soft power has a major role to play in influencing the world, influencing population and expanding your influence in the region.

*This session was recorded and can be found on YouTube at: <https://youtu.be/8k6bgUIZmhA/>*