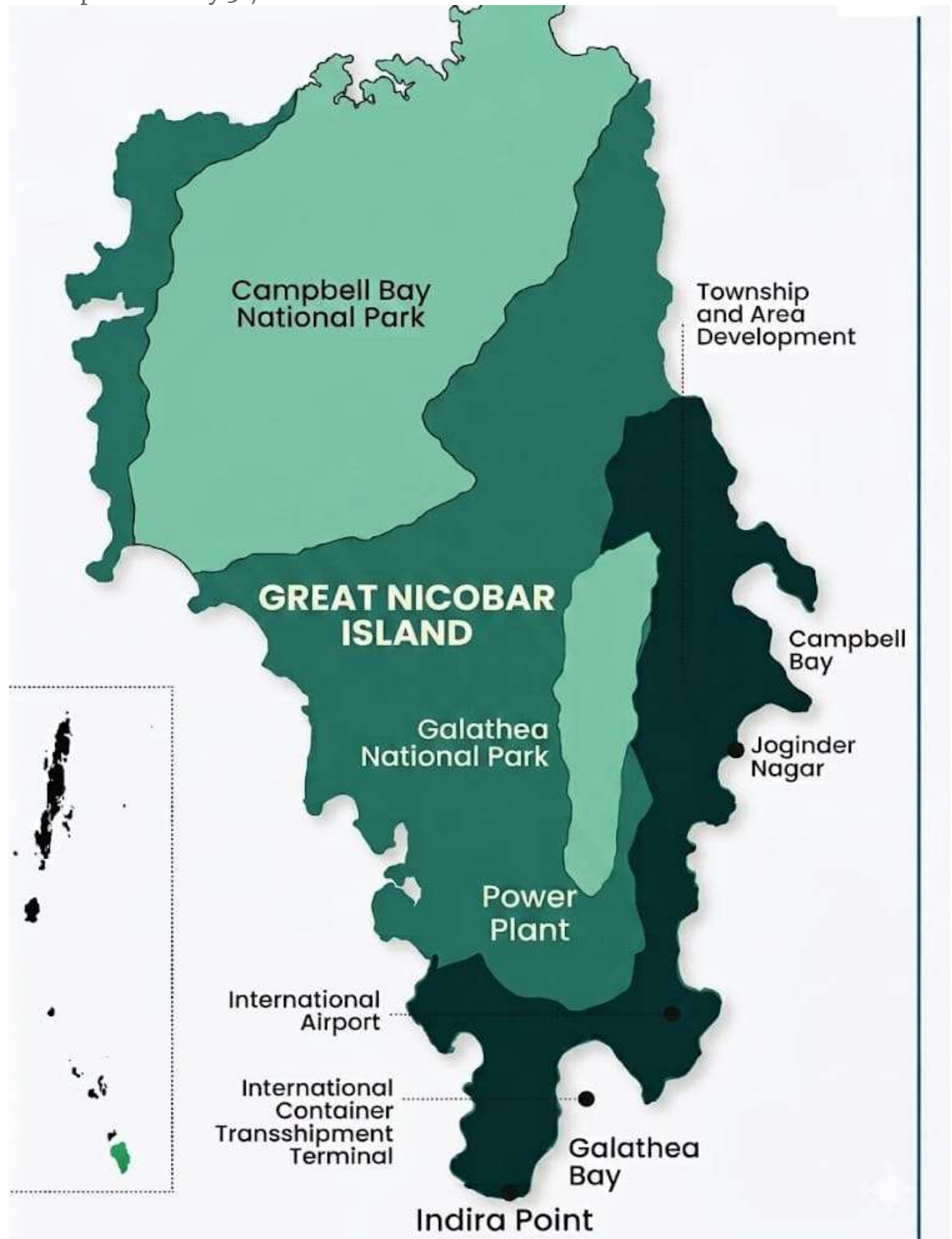


Can the Great Nicobar project be defended?

By: Hindol Sengupta

Last Updated: May 31, 2026



Can the Great Nicobar project be defended? image:file

Great Nicobar's defenders argue strategic necessity outweighs ecological, commercial and geopolitical criticisms surrounding the mega-project.

Infrastructure projects that have great strategic significance for a country are often intensely scrutinised and even criticised. And few recent projects have seen more criticism (and support in equal measure) than the Great Nicobar Project.

Therefore, it is critical to address all the criticism which this essay aims to do.

There is a familiar pattern in the history of strategic infrastructure. When the United States began dredging Pearl Harbor in 1901, critics called it a costly indulgence on a distant island. When Dubai announced the Jebel Ali Free Zone in 1985, analysts dismissed it as a mirage in the sand. When Malaysia developed Tanjung Pelepas in 1999, shipping economists warned it could never compete with Singapore. In each case, the critics were wrong, and the builders were right.

Today, the Great Nicobar Island Development Project faces a structurally identical battery of objections: that it is environmentally ruinous, that it will harm indigenous peoples, that it cannot compete commercially, that it will destabilise the region. Each of these criticisms deserves serious engagement, not dismissal. But each, on close examination, fails to withstand the weight of evidence and historical analogy.

The most serious criticism of the Great Nicobar project concerns its ecological impact: impacting around 130 (of the total approximately 166) square kilometres of primary tropical forest cleared, an estimated 700,000 trees felled, a UNESCO biosphere reserve disturbed, and the leatherback sea turtle's most important northern Indian Ocean nesting site at Galathea Bay threatened by dredging. These are genuine costs and no honest defender of the project should minimise them.

But the critics commit a logical error when they move from trying to address the concern to aiming to prevent the project. The relevant question is not whether development imposes environmental costs—every major port in the world will have some such cost—but whether those costs are proportionate, whether they are managed with scientific rigour, and whether they are outweighed by strategic and economic benefits of sufficient magnitude. On all three counts, the Great Nicobar project, if properly implemented, is worth constructing. Also, it is worth noting that less than two per cent of the total forest cover in the Andaman and Nicobar Islands would be touched for this project.

Consider the precedent of Singapore, one of the richest countries in the world with one of the highest per capita incomes, itself. The island's entire southern coastline has been altered by land reclamation. More than 60 per cent of its original coral reef has been destroyed. Virtually all of its mangrove forest, some of the most biodiverse coastal habitat in Southeast Asia, is gone. Singapore has lost more endemic species to development than Great Nicobar ever will. And yet no serious analyst argues that Singapore's development was a mistake, because the economic and strategic value it created—for Southeast Asia, for global trade, for the hundreds of millions of

people whose goods move through its terminals—vastly outweighs the ecological costs imposed on one small island.

The correct response to Great Nicobar's environmental challenges is not to halt the project but to fund and enforce the highest possible standard of mitigation: strict seasonal construction controls during leatherback nesting season, independent environmental monitoring with genuine enforcement authority, rigorous coral translocation under scientific supervision, and the full protection of Shompen territory through a dedicated exclusion zone. The government's own 42-condition environmental clearance framework provides a starting point; strengthening and genuinely enforcing those conditions is the constructive path forward.

The warning from experts that the project represents a 'death sentence' for the Shompen people commands serious attention. The Shompen are among the world's most isolated communities, at last count 237 individuals living in the forests of Great Nicobar with no immunity to common infectious diseases. The history of contact between isolated peoples and the outside world is, overwhelmingly, a history of demographic catastrophe.

But this concern argues for robust protection mechanisms, not project cancellation. The Jarawa tribe of South Andaman Island, similarly isolated and similarly vulnerable, has been successfully protected through a combination of legally enforced contact restrictions, tribal reserve notifications, and dedicated protection personnel. No Jarawa village was bulldozed to build Port Blair's commercial infrastructure. The same principle applies in Great Nicobar: the development of Galathea Bay and the Shompen's territorial integrity are not mutually exclusive. Most people do not seem to know that the Great Nicobar project will in fact lead to a net increase of around four square kilometres to the tribal reserve on the island.

Critics point, with some justification, to Great Nicobar's location atop the Sunda Megathrust, the fault line that generated the 2004 catastrophe in which the island's southern tip subsided by 4.5 metres. Infrastructure built here, they argue, is infrastructure built on borrowed time.

This is a challenge of engineering. Japan builds its most sophisticated industrial and military infrastructure in one of the most seismically active archipelagos in the world. The entire US Pacific Fleet is based at Pearl Harbor; built into a lagoon whose surrounding hills are volcanic. The answer to seismic risk is not to cede strategic geography to adversaries but to build to the highest available seismic standard, invest in early warning systems, develop comprehensive evacuation protocols, and ensure that hardened storage and dispersal facilities protect strategic assets from the most probable scenarios. To argue that India should leave its most important maritime real estate undeveloped because of seismic risk is to argue that Japan should never have built Yokosuka or that the United States should have abandoned Pearl Harbor. Neither has happened.

Perhaps the most persistent commercial criticism is that Galathea Bay cannot compete with Singapore, Colombo, or Port Klang, which are already established hubs with deep network effects, loyal carrier relationships, and world-class supporting ecosystems of financial and logistics services. On this argument, Great

Nicobar is a vanity project, a government-subsidised white elephant that will handle a fraction of its projected throughput and drain public funds for decades.

History offers a different story. When Tanjung Pelepas opened in Malaysia in 1999, Singapore's port industry dismissed it as a regional curiosity. Within two years, Maersk and Evergreen Marine — two of the world's largest shipping lines — had transferred their regional hub operations there, attracted by lower tariffs, faster turnaround times, and competitive handling rates. Tanjung Pelepas now handles approximately 11 million TEUs annually and has not destroyed Singapore; it has intensified competition and driven efficiency improvements that benefit shippers across the region. Similarly, the development of Colombo's South Container Terminal, partly funded by the Adani Group and John Keells Holdings in partnership with the Sri Lanka Ports Authority, has not cannibalised Singapore's throughput; it has captured cargo from the South Asian subcontinent that was previously forced to make a suboptimal routing through Singapore.

The container shipping industry does not operate on a zero-sum basis between competing hubs. It expands to accommodate new capacity and adjusts routings to reflect the genuine geographic and economic efficiency of new facilities. Galathea Bay's natural water depth of 18 to 20 metres — capable of accommodating ultra-large container vessels without the expensive dredging that constrains many established ports — and its position approximately 40 nautical miles from the east-west trunk route give it genuine structural advantages that no incumbent hub can neutralise simply by existing. The market will reward real efficiency.

The most commercially significant criticism — that a rival hub at the northern entrance to the Strait of Malacca will hollow out Singapore's transshipment business — dissolves on contact with the economics of global shipping. Singapore currently handles approximately 37 million TEUs annually, and its port is operating at close to capacity. The global container shipping market is projected to grow at three-four per cent annually through 2040, adding billions of TEUs of throughput that will require new hub capacity across the Indo-Pacific.

Singapore's long-term competitive advantage is not in raw port throughput — it is in the broader ecosystem of maritime services that surrounds the port: ship finance, marine insurance, arbitration, commodity trading, ship management, and the headquarters of virtually every major Asian shipping line. These activities are not port-dependent; they depend on Singapore's legal system, its financial infrastructure, its talent pool, and its regulatory environment. None of these is threatened by the development of a transshipment terminal 750 nautical miles to the north.

Indeed, the development of Galathea Bay is likely to generate business for Singapore in the medium term. A major transshipment hub in the Andaman Sea will require the same ecosystem of supporting maritime services, ship agents, freight forwarders, marine surveyors, bunker traders, and legal services, that Singapore has spent 200 years perfecting. Singapore's firms are ideally positioned to provide those services to the new hub, just as they currently provide them to Tanjung Pelepas, Colombo, and dozens of other regional ports. The development of Great Nicobar is not Singapore's loss; it is, at worst, the maturation of a complementary

hub and, at best, a significant expansion of the regional maritime economy that enriches the entire ecosystem.

Finally, critics, including some within India, argue that the militarisation of Great Nicobar will provoke China and destabilise the Bay of Bengal. The counter-argument is straightforward: deterrence is the foundation of stability, and the absence of credible deterrence is the foundation of aggression. China has constructed artificial islands in the South China Sea, established a military base in Djibouti, deployed survey ships throughout the Indian Ocean, and built intelligence facilities on Myanmar's Coco Islands, 55 kilometres from the Andaman chain. The proposition that India should leave its most valuable maritime real estate undeveloped as a gesture of goodwill to a power that has spent two decades methodically encircling it strains credulity.

Great nations build on their geographic inheritance. The United States built Pearl Harbor; United Kingdom built Singapore; Portugal transformed Malacca. None of them apologised for exercising the geographic advantages that history and geology had given them. India's moment at Galathea Bay is not provocation. It is the belated, overdue, and entirely legitimate exercise of a birthright that geography gave the country, and strategic wisdom demands, be used.

The critics of the Great Nicobar project should be answered with care but without the strategic needs of the country being forgotten. India can build greatly and build responsibly.

Hindol Sengupta is professor of international relations at the O.P. Jindal Global University.