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INDIAN AIR DOMINANCE TO ACHIEVE MARITIME SECURITY IN THE INDIAN OCEAN REGION

Pooja Bhatt
Research Associate, CAPS

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The Indian Ocean has an important role to play for the region's overall peace and prosperity and as a 'road of development in the 21st century'¹. It is a crucial geo-economic and geo-strategic region with India as a major regional player and stakeholder. New Delhi is well aware of the challenges such as sea-borne terrorism, piracy, and drug trafficking, that not just India, but other nations in the region also have to face. Furthermore, India is attempting to play a key role in the Indian Ocean to address the security challenges present². In this context, the recent forays of submarines and survey ships into the Indian Ocean waters by the Chinese PLAN, and its joint maritime exercises with Pakistani Navy in the Arabian Sea has been continuously noted by India³. Given India's maritime stakes and interests in the IOR, it becomes necessary for New Delhi to strengthen its presence in the region for its larger security ambitions. Against this backdrop, two recent developments, i.e.

establishment of a permanent presence of the IAF at airbases in the Andaman Nicobar Islands, and Exercise Gaganshakti's special focus on maritime air operations⁴ can be seen as taking a step towards securing its crucial SLOCs in the Indian Ocean.

Only 37 out of 572 islands are currently habitable, and their sensitive ecology, coupled with the indigenous population on these islands – mostly tribal – led to slow development of infrastructure and security architecture on these islands in the years immediately following independence.

India's 'Look East Policy' in the 1990s brought back the focus on the maritime interests and threats. Economically, India rebuilt its economic ties with the South East Asian countries. India is dependent upon the SLOCs that carry 90 percent of its maritime trade across the Indian Ocean. The Andaman & Nicobar islands are located close to the Strait of Malacca,

an important choke point south-east of the Andaman and Nicobar Islands in the Bay of Bengal. It is the shortest sea route between the Middle East and the growing Asian markets. Therefore, security of these SLOCs is a matter of concern for New Delhi. To address the security concerns, IAF started its operations in Car Nicobar since 1956 on deployment basis. Later, in 2001, Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) became India's first and the only tri-service theatre command with a three-star Commander-in-Chief drawn from the Indian Army, Navy and Air Force taking over charge in turn and reporting directly to the Chairman, Chiefs of Staff Committee. Besides, one squadron of Mi-17V5 helicopters that are permanently stationed at Carnic airfield, the ANC till recently had only 19 capital warships operated by Indian Navy and 1 Brigade of Army under direct control of ANC⁵. These capabilities are clearly inadequate to establish the required dominance over the crucial SLOCs in the Indian Ocean.

New Delhi's decision to strengthen its Carnic IAF airbase (on Car Nicobar island) by permanent basing of an IAF fighter squadron there can be seen as a step towards rectifying the issue. The airstrip at Campbell Bay (on the Great Nicobar Island) is being extended to accommodate heavier aircraft like the Maritime Reconnaissance aircraft of the IN (the P-8I). Shibpur – an airstrip on the northern tip of the Andaman and Nicobar islands – is also being extended to permit fighter operations in future.

An airfield is also likely to be built on the Great Nicobar Island that would permit basing of fighter aircraft in future. These, together, will strengthen India's aerial reach over the Malacca Strait and further to the Sunda and Lombok straits in the Eastern Indian Ocean. The entire command and control of all the defense forces in the ANC is under the leadership of the Commander-in-Chief Andaman and Nicobar Command (or CINCAN).

In addition to the infrastructure development and deployment of forces in the islands, there has been stress on building maritime operational capabilities. During the recently conducted IAF exercise 'GaganShakti 2018', special attention was given to maritime air operations. In the two week long exercise, extensive missions were flown by fighter aircraft – Su-30 and Jaguar – in conjunction with the IN P-8I MR aircraft and the AWACS and Flight Refuelling Aircraft of the IAF for carrying out long range strikes simulating the use of weapons like the BrahMos cruise and Harpoon long range missiles to refine and practise offensive and defensive tactics against maritime targets⁶.

The long range air operations conducted in the largest ever air exercise by the IAF demonstrated the enhanced operational reach of the IAF fighter aircraft with the help of air-to-air refuelling by IL-78 Flight Refuelling Aircraft. In the long range strike concept validation, the Su-30s, airborne from a base on the eastern coast engaged multiple targets on the western

seaboard of India, at distances beyond 2500 Km, and landed at a southern base, thus covering a total distance of 4000 Km, in a single mission⁷. The combat support assets with the IAF – the FRA and the AWACS – are capable of extending the reach of IAF fighter aircraft in the entire IOR as a strategic area of influence. The southernmost part of ANC, the INAS Baaz at Campbell Bay, is approximately 1250 kms from the Indian mainland. With permanent basing of IAF and IN assets in ANC, the area of aerial operations and maritime surveillance respectively in the IOR will increase enormously.

India's ambitions and its interests in the Indian Ocean did not match its inherent air and maritime capabilities till now. However, with these two subsequent approaches, Indian leadership and the defence forces have demonstrated their capabilities in the IOR. The focus on maritime ops under GaganShakti 2018 exercises established strike range capabilities of the IAF. When seen along with the thrust on activating bases in ANC, the strategic reach of Indian air power would increase substantially in the IOR.

(Disclaimer: The views and opinions expressed in this article are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the position of the Centre for Air Power Studies [CAPS])

Notes

¹ Ministry of Defence, Govt of India (2017), "Road to development in the 21st century goes through the Indian ocean – Shri Narendra Modi, Prime Minister “. Press Release published on Dec 14, 2017. URL: pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=174311

²Ibid

³The Print (2018), "Chinese Navy seems to be preparing to counter Indian submarines with Pakistani help", published on Feb 02, 2018. URL: <https://theprint.in/security/chinese-navy-preparing-counter-indian-submarines-pakistani-help/33165/>

⁴ Ministry of Defence, Govt of India (2018), "Maritime Air OPS: Ex Gagan Shakti-2018", Press Release published on April 17, 2018. URL: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=178738>

⁵ The Indian Express (2018), " Andaman & Nicobar Command set to get IAF fighter base", published on May 14, 2017. URL: <http://indianexpress.com/article/india/andaman-nicobar-command-set-to-get-iaf-fighter-base-5169095/>

⁶ Ministry of Defence, Govt of India (2018), "Maritime Air OPS: Ex Gagan Shakti-2018", Press Release published on April 17, 2018. URL: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=178738>

⁷ Ministry of Defence, Govt of India (2018), "Exercise Gaganshakti-2018: Maritime Air Operations", Press Release published on April 14, 2018. URL: <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=178692>