

Militarization of the Indian Ocean: China Spurs Navy Fortification in Andaman

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China's growing influence in the Indian Ocean region appears to have injected new momentum in India's efforts to fortify its farthest military outpost, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands.

Plans are afoot to upgrade airstrips to support fighter operations, induct 5,000 more troops and deploy additional warships, senior officials said.

Myanmar's Coco Islands, where the Chinese navy has reportedly set up a surveillance post, are barely 40 km from the Andamans' northernmost tip Landfall.

New Delhi may not openly flag concerns about China's strategic moves to squeeze India with its presence in Myanmar, Sri Lanka and Pakistan, but there is a growing realisation the Andamans hold the key to dominating a vital maritime zone.

Vice-Admiral D.K. Joshi, Commander-in-Chief, Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), said airstrips at Campbell Bay and Shibpur were being extended from 3,200 feet to 12,000 feet to support all types of aircraft, including fighters. The airstrips are being upgraded for night-flying operations too.

ANC sources said the army was planning to beef up its brigade-level deployment (around 3,000 soldiers) with three more battalions and support units. An officer said, "There are plans to induct a mechanised infantry battalion, an artillery regiment and an infantry unit."

The navy, too, is deploying more warships and patrol vessels in the region. Asked if the navy was concerned about the Chinese navy's expansion in the IOR, navy chief Admiral Nirmal Verma said, "The navy's plans are guided by what's happening in the region... not just by what a particular country is doing."

The Andamans are more than 1,200 km away from mainland India. A significant volume of China's oil imports passes through Malacca Strait, about 350 km from these islands.

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