

Andaman and Nicobar Command: From an Experiment to an Inspiration

*Pramod Sangwa**

The Andaman & Nicobar (A&N) Islands are India's gateways to the east and their significance in its national security calculus is increasingly being realised, as they fit perfectly in the jigsaw puzzle of India's 'Look East Policy'. They allow India to project its benign power and influence in consonance with its emerging status and role in the region. They also provide an ideal springboard for India to play a far more effective role in the area. Proximity to unstable littorals, coupled with the eventuality of extra-regional players extending their influence in the region, make them vulnerable to both conventional as well as sub-conventional threats. This translates into challenges and opportunities for India.

The importance of A&N Islands in the security matrix of the country is growing exponentially and the responsibility for this rests with the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC), which will play a key role in securing India's vital interests in the east and south. However a fine balance between defence and offence will have to be maintained in this. This is also linked to capacity building and other related developments which form the crux of jointmanship and the ANC will have to exemplify a fine example of jointness and synergy in the operational domain.

In pursuance of India's national ambitions, the command will continue to carry out multifarious tasks, because of its inherent flexibility, mobility, sustained reach and resilience. In order to realise the dream of an 'Unsinkable Carrier', it is imperative to have a visible strong military presence on these islands.

The Andaman & Nicobar Islands with their sun soaked and pristine beaches, incredible corals and marine life, an intriguing colonial past and the remnants of a stone age culture are not just a major tourist attraction but a paradise for strategic planners. Geographically closer to South East Asia, at the confluence of vital and the busiest sea lines of communication, these Islands straddle the Ten and Six degree channels leading to the Malacca Straits making the region of great strategic relevance in India's geopolitical and geostrategic milieu.

In view of the extended frontiers and military imperatives, India has to strengthen the security and develop its intrinsic capabilities in these Islands for protection

* **Col Pramod Sangwa** was commissioned in 4 Madras (WLI) in June 1989. He has been an instructor in AATS, Agra and the Infantry School. He is presently posted as CIO in HQ ANC.

and force projection including out of area contingencies. These issues are coupled with the core issues of power struggle and wresting of initiative, areas which need to be nurtured selectively and carefully.

Historical Perspective

In 1956, an Indian air force (IAF) forward base was set up at Car Nicobar. After the 1962 conflict a need was felt to increase presence at the islands for security reasons and hence *INS Jarawa* was commissioned in 1964. In 1972 -73, the first infantry battalion along with *INS Kardip* were deployed on the islands. Between 1981 to 1987, the Fortress Andaman and Nicobar (FORTAN) had a naval component and an infantry battalion. In May 1985, *INS Utkrosh* was commissioned. In November 1991, a mountain brigade was inducted into the islands. As a result of the Kargil Review Committee and on recommendations of Group of Ministers (GoM), the ANC was commissioned on October 8, 2001 as the first unified command, comprising the army, navy, air force and coast guard.

The ANC in its ten years of existence has defined itself as India's eastern most bastion. Certainly, it has risen from being an experiment to an inspiration; a true representation of seamless jointness between its four components.

Operations

Since its inception, the unified command described as the Sentinel Post for the east and the south, has effectively performed its charter of duties that encompass the safeguarding of the islands, the nation's maritime boundaries and air space, search and rescue at sea, as well as protecting the vast and vital EEZ.

As part of ANC's mission of 'Showing the Flag' and strengthening the spirit of friendship, ships of ANC regularly visit neighbouring countries like Myanmar, Indonesia, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore and carry out joint exercises / patrols as follows:

- a) **Ind-Indo Corpat:** A biannual India-Indonesia coordinated patrol (Ind-Indo Corpat) with the aim of coordinated patrolling, anti piracy exercises and search and rescue (SAR) missions is being held since 2003.
- b) **SIMBEX:** The annual Singapore-India Maritime Bilateral Exercise (SIMBEX) is being held since 2007. Beginning as an anti submarine warfare (ASW) exercise it has evolved to include three dimensional warfare and maritime security.

- c) **Indo-Thai Corpat:** The India-Thailand Coordinated Patrol (Indo-Thai Corpat) for coordinated patrolling, anti piracy exercise and Search and Rescue (SAR) is being conducted since 2006. This has enhanced mutual confidence levels between the two defence forces and led to a significant decrease in poaching by Thai trawlers.

Anti Poaching Operations: These well co-ordinated sea-air surveillance operations held with the marine police have played a pivotal role in checking poaching and illegal fishing activities. Since 2001, 3105 poachers and 299 boats /dinghies have been apprehended.

ORI and TACEX: ANC conducts Operational Readiness Inspections of its own forces as well as a Tactical Exercise (TACEX) to maximise resources in a conventional warfare scenario with an aim to improve defensive capability and operational readiness.

Coastal Sec Exercise “Tat Suraksha”: A bi-annual coastal security exercise “TAT SURAKSHA” in collaboration with the state security and administrative agencies is carried out to thwart maritime threats, thus validating the motto “United We Respond”.

Milan - ‘Friendship Across the Seas’: The biennial MILAN is a gathering of like minded navies of the Asia Pacific region, and has grown into an eagerly awaited event in the Indian Ocean region providing a prime opportunity for interactions to foster bonds of ‘Friendship across the Seas’ and develop mutual trust, co-operation and understanding.

Operation ‘Madad’: December 26, 2004 would always be remembered as the most poignant and challenging day in the history of ANC. The A&N islands which lie in Seismic Zone-5 along the Arakan Yoma range were hit by the worst ever tsunami. Each and every member of the Command rose to the occasion and made efforts as enshrined in its motto ‘Service Before Self’, to alleviate the sufferings of fellow islanders, as some of the soldiers, sailors and airmen involved in these operations, had themselves suffered great losses.

Nearly 11,725 persons were evacuated from affected islands by sea and air to other islands. Fourteen to 16 warships were deployed at any one time, 2800 tonnes of essential supplies, 5700 personnel, 57 vehicles, engineering & plant equipment were moved and trans-shipped to or, from the southern group of Islands.

Myanmar Relief Operation: ANC's commitment to extend humanitarian aid and disaster relief in addition to its operational commitments in the littorals was amply displayed post the May 2008 devastation caused by cyclone Nargis in Myanmar.

Looking Ahead

The littorals of the IOR need to unite through 'Regional Forums' and confidence building measures for which a strong democratic and stable country like India serves as an ideal launch pad.

In pursuance of India's national aspirations the Command continues to carry out multifarious tasks, given its inherent flexibility, mobility, sustained reach and resilience. In order to realise the dream of an 'Unsinkable Carrier' and to act as a dissuasive deterrent, plans are in place to upgrade two airports, into full length all weather, all aircraft capable runways in the very near future. It is imperative to have a visible, strong and deterrent military capability at these islands.

The A&N islands are perhaps, the best example of civil – military cooperation in promoting regional growth and security, contributing substantially to the best interests of the country. The freedom, safety and prosperity of these islands and their inhabitants coupled with safeguarding of vital national intent will always remain the primary task of this unified Command - today, tomorrow and always.

