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India's Joint Andaman and Nicobar Command is a Failed Experiment

BY ANIT MUKHERJEE

In October 2001, with much fanfare, India announced the creation of a joint command in the Andaman and Nicobar island chain, which dominates the western approach to the Malacca strait. From the perspective of jointness and from what was originally envisaged by its architects, the Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) has turned out to be a failed experiment. However, this episode sheds light on the Indian military, its higher defense management and also provides insights about India's Look East policy and its military engagements and capabilities in the South China Sea.

Anit Mukherjee, Assistant Professor at Nanyang Technological University in Singapore, explains that “Not only has [the Andaman and Nicobar Joint Command] failed to usher in more joint commands, but the experience might be cited by those within the military community who are opposed to [such cooperation].”

India's model of civil-military relations leaves operational and organizational matters almost entirely to the military. The ANC was India's first joint command, but the individual services were opposed to the idea as they feared a loss of power and a cutback on senior officer billets. They did everything they could to prevent this experiment from succeeding. This was done mainly by denying service assets to the ANC. The only major assets it gained in its 13 years of service were an amphibious landing ship, *INS Kesari*, and a naval offshore patrol vehicle, *INS Saryu*, a few fast attack boats and some Dornier aircraft. Other problems included a bitter inter-service dispute over land and a failure to agree upon a common military code. The peculiar system of rotation of the command among the three services resulted in a rapid turnover in the post of the commander-in-chief, Andaman and Nicobar command (CINCAN), with 12 of them appointed since 2001, averaging a little over a year in command. To better appreciate these difficulties, one has to analyze the motivation of individual services.

Due to its maritime imperative the Indian Navy has historically claimed ownership of the island chain and until 2001 all military units stationed there functioned under a naval commander. In 2001, in an act of magnanimity, the Indian Navy willingly offered this post for the joint command “experiment.” The leadership at that time believed that the success of this initiative would lead to other joint operational commands. But, over time, the Navy came to see this decision as a mistake as no more joint commands were formed. According to reports the navy is currently lobbying the government to revert this command back to them. While denying assets to the ANC, the Indian navy has strengthened Eastern Naval Command (ENC), based in Visakhapatnam, which has emerged as India's most important naval command. Indeed, the strategic dimensions of India's Look East policy—in terms of visits and exercises of the Indian Navy in the South China Sea—are conducted by elements from the ENC instead of the geographically proximate ANC.

The Indian Air Force was initially enthusiastic about the ANC and went about enlarging its bases on the islands. After the 2004 tsunami, which devastated Car Nicobar air

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base, leading to the loss of 116 air force personnel and their families, their enthusiasm waned. The air force has since discarded plans to permanently base aircraft on the islands and has currently designated Kalaikunda air force station, more than 1000 kilometers away on the Indian mainland, to provide air cover. The impracticality of this arrangement is seemingly lost on defense planners. The army has little role to play and few platforms to deploy on the islands. Notably, it has added only a Territorial Battalion to the ANC while building up an amphibious brigade capability in Thiruvananthapuram on the mainland.

The Andaman and Nicobar Joint Command therefore has been a “grand failure” in terms of what was envisaged by its architects. Not only has it failed to usher in more joint commands, but the experience might be cited by those within the military community who are opposed to this idea. Among former Commanders in Chief of the ANC the common refrain was that the experience represented not only a missed opportunity but an overall “sad story.” Significantly, civilians have played no role in either building up the ANC or pushing for more joint commands. In fact, as noted by a report of the standing committee on defense, civilians did not even fill up mandated posts in the ANC, including a diplomatic post, as “no one wanted to go there.”

This is not to say that no capabilities have been built up on the islands. In terms of infrastructure development, there has been some steady progress. A naval air base was established at Campbell Bay and runway extensions planned for another naval base at Shibpur. There are plans to build Operational Turn Round (OTR) bases at Campbell Bay, Dighpur and Kamorta while facilities at Port Blair, including a second floating dock, are being upgraded. These initiatives, though welcome, do not address the lack of assets under the ANC. The current CINCAN, Vice Admiral PK Chatterjee, recently stated that the ANC needs “Command and Control Ships and submarines...we require an entire fleet.”

The failure of the ANC also reflects on the ongoing debate about India’s ties to broader East Asia. Some analysts argue that ANC will continue to suffer from neglect unless a considered, and strategically significant, decision is taken to economically develop the island chain. Currently, only 7% of the land, spread over 570 islands, is available for revenue purposes as the rest consists of protected forests and water bodies. There are no international flights to Port Blair, thereby constraining tourism. Environmental concerns, including protection of indigenous tribes, therefore have trumped economic development due to which the islands, despite obtaining 30% of India’s total Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ), depend upon the central government for its fiscal outlays. One of the big ideas that could transform the region has been debated for a while—the creation of a transshipment hub at Car Nicobar. If implemented this can be a strategic game changer, as it could rival the ports of Singapore and Colombo and give India enormous economic and strategic leverage. Naturally, such an investment will need to be protected and so ANC will be strengthened, giving it the capability to dominate the sea lanes of the Indo-Pacific. On the other hand, some in India oppose such a vision not just on environmental grounds but also argue that having a low military footprint in the Andaman and Nicobar islands is diplomatically advantageous so that other countries in Southeast Asia do not feel threatened. Resolving this debate will offer some clues to the outlines of the Indian counter-reaction to China’s foray into the Indian Ocean and more assertive stance in the South China Sea.