

Militarisation of Minicoy Island

Strengthening India's Starboard Flank

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India is facing increased threats through both conventional and unconventional means hence it needs to shore up its capabilities in its western and eastern flanks of island clusters. The eastern side is relatively well protected through the presence of military assets in the Andaman archipelago, but the same cannot be said about the Lakshadweep group of islands on the western flank. There is an urgent need to improve our military preparedness in the Lakshadweep area that can detect and respond to sea-based threats in real time. The construction of a runway on Minicoy Island that is capable of hosting fighter/bomber operations would go a long way in assuaging threats, and support India in effectively balancing the power equation through force posturing.

Keywords: *Minicoy, runway, aircraft, China, USA, drugs, Maldives, Pakistan*

INTRODUCTION

A maritime country requires a maritime defence and associated maritime capabilities, and India is no exception to this rule. India by geography is a maritime country with a coastline that exceeds 7,516 km and touches nine states. It lies surrounded by the Bay of Bengal in the east, the Indian Ocean

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in the south and the Arabian Sea in the west. It has a chain of islands on both its eastern and western flanks, which serve as a bulwark in ensuring India's extended Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). These chains of islands are India's most tangible strategic assets. In addition to being both vital and vulnerable, these can easily be transformed into islands of opportunity. Most of these assets remain uninhabited and pose certain pressing challenges to India's coastal security.

The Indian Ocean is one of the five great oceans of the world, with its own distinguishing features. It is measuredly predominant due to its conveyance avenue that accounts for more than 80 per cent of the world's seaborne oil and trade transit and the deployment of considerable military forces. A dynamic security environment in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR) has brokered a competition for regional influence by regional and extra regional powers. India's problems get accentuated due to the presence of inimical countries that pose challenges to its territorial security through both conventional and unconventional threats, contesting India's dominance in the Indian Ocean.

India is the most capable resident power in the Indian Ocean, but its expanding military footprint is uneven and reliant on multiple factors. A serious strategic forecasting is essential to ensure that India's maritime vulnerabilities get addressed by the execution of the national security policy. India is endowed with the Andaman & Nicobar islands in its eastern flank and the Lakshadweep islands in its western flank. The eastern flank is militarily well covered, but the same cannot be said about the western flank. Lakshadweep is a cluster of islands situated in the Arabian Sea, off the southwestern coast of the Indian mainland. It is a designated 'Union Territory' of India and guards the nation's maritime frontiers. However, the island chain of Lakshadweep and Minicoy needs to be militarily shored up to meet the growing challenges in the region. This paper aims to discuss the necessity of building a runway on Minicoy by the Indian Air Force (IAF) and operationalising it to be used as a dual-purpose runway with accessibility by all the four military services and commercial aircraft. Additionally, it would support the development of a military establishment in tandem with the necessary research and development back up and logistical support. This runway could be geo-strategically decisive for India.

REAL AND JUSTIFIED ANXIETY

The coastal regions of India from time immemorial have been the Achilles heel in its security and have been one of the significant entryways for intrusions and invasions, notably from the western coast. This western coastline is vast and borders crucial parts where many locations aren't easily accessible; it is also the hub for sub-conventional threats. Lakshadweep is a small archipelago on India's southwestern flank; it links sea lanes to the Middle East and plays a leading part in the geostrategic games taking place in the Indian Ocean. A number of islands in the archipelago remain unpopulated; among its 36 islands, only 10 are inhabited. In addition to attached islets, four newly formed islets and five submerged reefs, the island chain also includes stranded beaches, barren areas and other geographical features. With scanty to nil human settlements near such natural features, it becomes easier for terrorists sponsored by inimical countries to exploit this vulnerable zone and enter the country without being noticed.¹

There are several clear and present dangers to India if adequate security beefing does not take place in the Lakshadweep archipelago including the construction of airfields capable of hosting both military and civil aircraft. These dangers include:

- Being home to large cities, industrial hubs and IT centres, the southern part of India is exceptionally vulnerable to high-profile terrorist incidents.
- The Lakshadweep Police, controlled by the Indian Home Ministry, has a sanctioned strength of 349 personnel for 9 police stations, 2 police out posts and 1 police aid post. In addition, about 350 personnel of the Indian Reserve Force have been sanctioned to assist the police force.² There are also Indian Coast Guard (ICG) and Indian Navy (IN) personnel situated at various spots on the island chain. However, the number of these personnel is considered insufficient considering the expanse of the islands and the threats envisaged.
- Seizure of narcotics and guns from Sri Lanka are indicators of growing narco terrorism and this is only the tip of the iceberg as there is a definite possibility of the uninhabited islands in the Lakshadweep archipelago being used to hoard weapons, narcotics and even enabling terrorists to lie low for specific periods.³
- The number of Rohingya refugees entering Sri Lanka is steadily increasing despite staunch protests by the Buddhist clergy.⁴ The Rohingyas are seeking new abodes with the help of Sri Lankan human traffickers who are aware of the uninhabited islands of Lakshadweep. There must be a

constant monitoring of these islands and with the available assets this would be a difficult task to perform.

- The presence of floating armouries, which are vessels that provide offshore storage of weapons and security equipment in the Galle region of Sri Lanka and areas close to our western coast, is a cause for growing concern. These armouries are used by Private Maritime Security Companies (PMSC) and are manned by Privately Contracted Armed Security Personnel (PCASP) who tend to operate without any governmental oversight and are primarily to provide security to merchant vessels from any acts of piracy or maritime terrorism. These unregulated floating armouries carrying combatants of specific countries can pose a real danger to Indian coastal regions and facilitate terrorist infiltrations, like the one witnessed during the Mumbai siege. The continued presence of these armed PCASP can lead to the militarisation of the maritime domain, with possible adverse consequences for local communities.⁵ The killing of two Indian fisherman by Italian marines who mistook them for pirates in February 2012, and the seizure of the American floating armoury MV Seaman Guard Ohio off the coast of Tuticorin in Tamil Nadu in October 2013 are noteworthy for the brazenness of the actions and the utter disregard for international law. The possibility of these floating armouries being forcibly taken over by terrorists for carrying out attacks on Indian installations cannot be ruled out. Furthermore, the vessels currently being used as floating armouries are not purpose-built as an armoury, instead they are adapted crafts. As a result, these vessels may not have safe and secure storage for arms and ammunition and can lead to mid sea accidents with dangerous consequences.
- The island chain's adjacency to the Maldives is seen as an extra concern. Indian security agencies fear that Lakshadweep's population would be easy prey for Maldivian anti-national outfits.
- With Mohammed Muizzu, an avowed Chinese backer, at the helm of Maldivian affairs, there is the possibility of the maritime observatory station in Makunudhoo being revived, which was put on hold by the previous government. Maldives is one of the closest islands to India and its support would enable the Chinese to access the shipping route channel via the Indian Ocean, potentially facilitating the opening of a maritime front against India. The northern-most island in the Maldives is just 70 nautical miles away from Minicoy, which is a matter of concern.
- There is also the possibility of China using its presence in the IOR via the Gwadar Port. The development of Gwadar's airfield may make it the

largest in Pakistan as well allow it to support People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF) deployments. This airfield would permit Chinese airpower to move into the northwest Indian Ocean quickly and easily pose a serious threat to Indian sea lanes. The Gwadar Port is of extra importance to China as it is slowly increasing its aircraft carrier forces. It will offer a safe sanctuary to retire to in time of conflict, thus avoiding being clogged and trapped if the Malacca, Lombok or Sunda Straits are blockaded.

These developments should increase India's challenges in acquiring a substantial deterrent capability and should be accorded the highest priority in the government's defence planning. An airbase on Minicoy, after the construction of a runway, would prove to be a deciding factor in countering the abovementioned threats. The proposals herein are intended to initiate a necessary, if modest, move for introspection concerning stability and security in the western flank of India. It is also essential that this build-up on Minicoy should not be from a single service perspective but involve the other services and elements of civil aviation as well.

ADVERSARY APPROACHES

India needs to outline the objective of increasing its ability to defend its coastal areas, straits and surrounding waters from the Chinese Navy and also from certain friendly nations who do not hesitate in violating India's territorial integrity, as witnessed in April 2021. It was USS John Paul Jones, a warship belonging to the United States 7th Fleet, that carried out a freedom of navigation exercise near the Lakshadweep islands without seeking India's prior consent. Instead of deterring adversaries this unwarranted action successfully managed to alienate friends. It makes one wonder whether to view it as a continuation of America's gun-boat diplomacy or is it the new American gun-boat democracy? It was in 1971 that US President Richard Nixon had despatched the 7th Fleet to the Bay of Bengal to deter India. Not coincidentally, exactly 50 years after this incident, in 2021 a US warship from the same 7th Fleet violates India's sovereignty, which is a disquieting puzzle. Is it a historical message? The 7th Fleet has created an infamous reputation in India's strategic consciousness, which cannot be easily erased.⁶ These Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs) being carried out by the US Navy can diminish India's credibility to deter China's encroachment into India's maritime zone of influence. After all, the legitimacy of India's position

hinges on an equal application of the law on all, whether friend or foe, and may force India not to bring USA in its circle of trust.

The rise of China has altered India's geopolitical imperative and there is a necessity to make urgent informed strategic decisions before the effects become disastrous. It is a known fact that China does not have any fundamental respect for institutional norms as was evident when it did not bother about the adjudication by the arbitral tribunal based in Hague in 2016 against it for violating Philippine's territories. China has steadfastly begun to assemble strategic ascendancy in South Asia and the Indian Ocean through a sizeable programme of security assistance, including military diplomacy and the construction of infrastructure such as ports. It has rapidly increased its direct military presence in the region through an ostensible Gulf of Aden antipiracy task force. The People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) now regularly sails surface combatants, submarines and oceanographic survey ships through the Indian Ocean. Given this environment the helipad on Minicoy Island is too limited to support realistic military activity on the atoll, thus supporting plans to develop a full-scale military air base with a runway for land-based aircraft.

SECURITY THREAT MULTIPLIERS

China's new forward-looking naval strategy has been increasingly evident and is proving that PLAN is no longer a littoral force. In 2020, it became the largest navy in the world, with an overall battle force of approximately 350 ships and submarines, including over 130 major surface combatants. In comparison, the IN has 150 ships and submarines. Adaptive and thinking adversaries such as China will continue to modernise their capabilities and in addition to adjusting them rapidly to the changing operational environment they will also improve the long-range precision strike of their missile force. The PLAN expansion was primarily with the United States as the intended adversary, but now will extend into the Indian Ocean thereby presenting a threat to India's maritime operations.⁷ The extraordinarily rapid modernisation of the PLAN, which poses a new, more comprehensive threat from China, puts Indian interests in peril in the Indian Ocean and the Arabian Sea. Further, a large US footprint in the littoral South Asia may also be detrimental to India's security interests.

The American naval destroyer's maritime violation in India's EEZ in 2021 represents its increasing inclination to take India and its allegiance for granted. Its insistence on navigational freedom in the EEZs including non-disputed zones in Lakshadweep unlike the South China Sea is a worrisome

factor. The US Navy's audacity can embolden warships of other navies to violate Indian authority and jurisdiction in the waters off island territories. Further, there are fully operational US bases in Bahrain, Diego Garcia, Djibouti, Kuwait and Qatar—all bettered by several bilateral arrangements with other Indian Ocean littoral states. This ensures that the US can speedily deploy significant airpower across the Indian Ocean to any trouble spot envisaged. These developments thus give us indicators about the capabilities that we must develop.

While India should not compete with US deployments it can at least strengthen its western flank and resist the imposition of power by the US or any other dominant group. By being forward deployed and forward engaged, the Indian Armed Forces with an offensive aerial overview would provide a persistent presence that acts as a deterrent as well as an enabler for follow on actions. On 31 May 2023, four Rafale aircraft of the Indian Air Force (IAF) undertook a six-hour-long operational mission in the Indian Ocean. Similarly, on 09 June 2023, several Sukhoi-30 aircraft, also from the IAF, undertook a mission that required them to fly for nearly eight hours.⁸ If they are forward based in Minicoy, these aircraft would not only extend the span of their operational coverage but would also provide them with extended endurance. The IAF and the IN can participate together in open ocean exercises to counter any conventional and non-conventional threats from the islands of Lakshadweep.

Despite China being India's primary maritime preoccupation, India also has to contend with certain other naval capabilities and activities that although are less threatening continue to be an irritant. India has to shoulder the responsibility to protect India's EEZ and the seabed resources within it. The quality and quantity of platforms is important to demonstrate capability and offer viable deterrence.

To sustain and counter a potential PLAN expansion on the western coast of India, it needs to place pronounced emphasis on infrastructure hardening including constructing runways, increasing information processing capacity and highly operational communications systems and improving air defence on Minicoy Island. Further, the operationalisation of helipads on other islands can serve as a deterrent in countering sub-conventional threats and can also be effectively used for anti-submarine operations against a hostile force. These can be ensured when India enhances its military presence on the island chain through robust asset building, deployment and the proposed runway becoming operational on Minicoy. It can thus display its imposing capabilities including tactical creativity and

high degree of adaptability while telegraphing the resolve to use them if the need so arises, which will improve the prospects for deterring opponents, and thereby preserving peace.

STRATEGIC BLIND SPOTS

India has been concentrating on strengthening its eastern flank through the positioning of various military assets in the Andaman & Nicobar group of islands including reconnaissance aircraft, helicopters, both from the IAF and IN, air defence radars, amphibious forces from the Indian Army, naval warships and fast attack crafts. However, it has not been pursuing strengthening its western flank with the same vigour in the Lakshadweep chain of islands. This strategy of threat postponement can prove to be dangerous. Unfortunately, Indian military strategists have been focussing on ground forces managing threats against the two nuclear adversaries on the nation's northern continental periphery. Airpower despite its overwhelming destructive capabilities has prescriptively been used only as a supporting aide to land power, rather than as an independent strategic tool. India cannot hope to acquire low footprint, high return on investment assets unless the necessary force-in-readiness is positioned at the littorals to execute domain specific missions. To remain relevant in future conflict scenarios, India needs to constantly exercise its skills and adapt its doctrine to the changing global scenario not merely to ensure just deterrence by denial but also be geared up to face higher-end conflict contingencies.

Despite India successfully fighting five land wars, its vulnerability continues to be its vast coastline where adversaries can employ asymmetric marine strategies, for example the illegal littoral intrusions that led to bomb attacks and a terrorist siege in Mumbai at varied timelines. Narcotics pouring into the country also make their way through the porous coastline ably aided by deleterious elements. The scantily populated islands and sandbars of Lakshadweep provide perfect hideaways and sanctuaries for infiltrators and contraband.⁹ India needs to work towards a strategic rebalance in the Lakshadweep region to fulfil the ever-increasing range of tasks expected of it. Therefore, it is especially important to distinguish India's aspirations from its existing capabilities.

A number of impending capability replacement decisions will provide an opportunity to enhance India's military capabilities in the region to counter the ever-growing threats. There is little hope and even less likelihood of China reconciling its differences with India in the near

future. Beijing appears poised to translate its growing economic power into greater military strength and geopolitical weight with a steadfast focus on cutting India to size. China has unleashed punitive threats to intimidate Taiwan ahead of its 2024 presidential election through increased military pressure to wear out the Taiwanese defence forces. With a sizeable military strength and a favourable Maldivian government in place, it will not be long before China starts flexing its muscles in India's soft southwestern under belly. Therefore, India can ill afford errors in its operational assessment. The northernmost point of Maldivian waters is only 100 km from the Indian island of Minicoy and is around 380 km from the Lakshadweep capital Kavaratti. This Maldivian point is worryingly only 425 km from the nearest point of the Indian mainland, the coast of Thiruvananthapuram.

WHY MINICOY—THE BIG PICTURE

Minicoy Island is located south of the Nine Degree Channel, which is the gateway to voluminous sea traffic numbering almost 12 ships a minute. The distance between Minicoy and Thuraakunu (the northernmost island of Maldives) is just 70 nautical miles.¹⁰ Minicoy is the second largest among India's Lakshadweep cluster of islands. Maldives lies south of Minicoy and further south is the Diego Garcia military base. Maldives has had a changeable past and both India and China vie for influence there for obvious strategic reasons to establish maritime pickets. Diego Garcia is a large US military base from where USA conducts its war on terror operations. To the northwest of Minicoy lies the Gulf of Aden and Somalia. These waters are infested with maritime pirates. This is why a runway that facilitates fighter operations on Minicoy will not only be a visual deterrence but can also send strategic warnings. A forward-looking flying base in Minicoy can keep a hawkish eye on enemy movement even before it can reach anywhere near the mainland and offset the absent Indian aerospace dominance in the region.

The crucial Nine Degree Channel, which separates Minicoy from the main Lakshadweep archipelago, is essentially the most direct route for all ships sailing from the Persian Gulf to East Asia. India can effectively carry out maritime constabulary duties as the location of air base in Minicoy is located around 300 km from the Indian mainland and it would give Indian military fighter aircraft an extended combat radius. Aircraft would provide a rapid, highly manoeuvrable, and flexible element in this environment. Further, they

will enhance the ability to engage hostile elements as far from the Indian shores as possible. Additionally, electronic monitoring of the IOR could also be effectively carried out by establishing units with holistic capability on Minicoy.

REQUIREMENT ANALYSIS

The Indian defence budget is a huge guzzler of money and for obvious reasons involving both conventional and non-conventional threats, India can least afford to lower its guard in military preparedness. Under such compelling financial constraints, the investment in airpower through the air base in Minicoy is low risk because it will leverage both proven capabilities and performance in operations, training, sustainment and innovation. Its value for money is diverse from increasing India's sovereign options to effective power projection and deterrence. Single investments pay off in multiple areas and easily bridge the gap between desirability and feasibility.

The problem of land acquisition would not arise as the land lies under the control of the Indian government and technical parameters such as approach to the runway, history of wind and weather conditions, the length of the runway with its run out area, the link and parallel taxi tracks, aircraft take-off weight, and land for housing the ATC, aprons, runway lighting, navigational aids and rapid exit taxiways can easily be identified by domain specialists of the IAF. The necessity of establishing the techno-economic and financial feasibility of the proposed development can be looked after by the office of the air force. This should include environmental concerns of airport operations as well the documentation of policies and future aeronautical demand with reference to spending and land use control.

The project can be effectively executed by the Military Engineering Services (MES), which has decades of experience in construction and maintenance of runways. The runways on the island chain of Andaman & Nicobar are testimony to the efficacy of MES maintenance. Materials required for construction of the runway can be easily shipped from Cochin, which is one of the major cities in the state of Kerala and is relatively close to Minicoy Island. Factors of sea erosion, rising sea temperatures, flooding, sea retaining walls around the airfield, forecast of airport traffic, alternate airfields in case of emergencies can all be considered for effective completion of the project.

STRATEGIC FRAMEWORK

The key to continued success for the IAF from peace to war is in finding the right mix and balance of airpower capabilities. Changes in the security environment after the rise of a belligerent China have helped to shape new trajectories in Indian airpower to carry out conventional and nonconventional military operations. The following strategic objectives would be achieved through dedicated air effort at Minicoy:

1. Permanent military presence on Minicoy Island
2. Strengthened professional capabilities
3. Improved crisis management response
4. Prevention of interference from foreign actors
5. Provision of a more effective platform for furthering our interests in the IOR
6. Better execution of our strategic objectives
7. Equipped to counter challenges posed by pirates in the IOR
8. Provision of a launch pad during symmetric and asymmetric conflicts

FORTIOR SIMUL—STRONGER TOGETHER

This Latin saying is so profound and timeless that it has been adapted, retold and incorporated in countless military mediums to express the point of strength in unity. Hence, to leverage this truth India should develop quadra-Service tactics, techniques and procedures with the goal of meeting the immediate needs of strengthening India's western flank in the Lakshadweep group of islands. This joint force can thus perceive and make sense of the operating environment. It can then devise winning strategies, targeting in dynamic situations, intelligence support and apply the laws of armed conflict when the situation so warrants.

In 2012, the IN operationalised a naval base INS Dweeprakshak on Kavaratti Island. In addition, three naval detachments (NAVDETs) are also operational, one each on the islands of Minicoy, Kavaratti and Androth. In addition, the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) has a District Headquarters (CGHQ-12) in Kavaratti, the capital of the Union Territory of Lakshadweep. A fourth NAVDET is likely to come up on Bitra Island.¹¹ There is a 1,291-metre-long asphalt runway on Agatti that is operated by Airports Authority of India (AAI); this is however, not suitable for fighter operations and only compatible with medium lift transport aircraft. The IN has been demanding the extension of this runway to 3,200 metres to facilitate operation of all

variants of aircraft. The planned transition will facilitate the operation of P-8I Poseidon reconnaissance aircraft, which currently operate from Arakkonam in Tamil Nadu.

The use of the P-8I from Agatti will enhance Indian surveillance reach to as far as South Africa. It will also provide India an extended combat region and enhance its combat credible posture. The ICG and the naval forces may not be able to operate efficiently without close air support from the IAF; Minicoy-based fighters can effectively carry out dual-role sorties thereby looking after air-to-air and air-to-ground threats. The inter-component coordination and planning mechanisms for joint air operations will be effective for a variety of possible demand scenarios and the formulation of integrated defence strategies.

Necessity of Haste

It has become imperative for India to maintain a striking force in a U shape, embracing the Andaman & Nicobar group of islands and curving into the Lakshadweep island chain thus enhancing our higher end joint warfare capabilities. The island chains on either flank can effectively function as unsinkable aircraft carriers and Minicoy Island if developed into a full-fledged military base with a runway capable of taking all kind of aircraft can be an effective counter against the Chinese and other forces. In the event of any cross-strait blockade or a naval conflict, India's main advantage would be the availability of armed air cover. The availability of combat aircraft on Minicoy would certainly deter adversaries from taking any coercive action. This avenue of weakness should be converted into an outpost of strength.

The island-based airpower can travel at great speeds and can be quickly deployed to a hot spot to immediately begin combat operations. On the contrary, even with advance warning the IN and ICG ships will always be limited by the time it takes them to reach a given point of conflict. The selective use of land-based airpower affords India a cost effective and quick alternative to engage an enemy navy or perform a variety of maritime missions. The IAF operating out of Minicoy would certainly provide the Theatre Commander commanding the Peninsular Command, probably in Karwar, Karnataka, a flexible and responsive force. The composition can be a specially tailored package, which can include support and strike aircraft such as the Maritime Strike Jaguars and Sukhoi-30 of the IAF, which can be quickly deployed and be ready for sustained combat operations. Such aircraft can comfortably engage enemy shipping with the Precision Guided Munitions (PGMs) and

laser guided munitions or undertake air-to-air missions with their multiple armaments.

It has been proven that modern combat aircraft can travel at supersonic speeds, patrol far from their bases and use standoff weapons to destroy targets from a safe distance even when the optics are challenging. This is something that a surface combat ship simply cannot do. Airpower is a major force multiplier component and in comparison to a costly naval build-up on Minicoy that might not carry through the necessary increase in maritime striking power. To meet the demands of our national military strategy, an operational approach that relies on air force fighters/bombers to declare Indian offensive intent would be best.

The fighter/bombers' relative speed advantage over surface naval vessels enables these aircraft to strike targets at short notice with precision. Their speed also gives these aircraft rapid re-strike capability, as they can return to base, reload and launch new strikes in a matter of just hours. In stark contrast, submarines and ships could take over a week to replenish their weapons stocks. Even accounting for forward anchorages or replenishment underway, bombers could launch far more weapons in a comparable timeframe.

The offensive aircraft currently in service with the IAF are designed to carry large payloads and travel long distances at speeds 30 to 40 times faster than ships, while requiring a fraction of the resources and manpower to achieve commensurate combat effects. A Sukhoi-30 can carry Brahmos anti-ship missiles along with Astra air-to-air missiles and Rudram air-to-ground missiles, making it a lethal platform to ensure maritime offence. Long-range strike weapons and cruise missiles can generate a large amount of flexible strike capacity on board IAF fighters/bombers. In addition to the strike flexibility of their weapons, the range and speed of bombers allow for increased operational flexibility in maritime missions. They can approach from unpredictable directions and attack from multiple azimuths simultaneously.

Offensive airpower can ensure that enemy forces in the littoral environment are reduced or suppressed through aerial interdiction to a level of least risk posing prior to an amphibious assault. Further, air superiority as a coordinated support operation must be quickly gained and maintained to protect the amphibious forces at sea during the changeover to land and until the amphibious assault is complete. It is during this adaptation from afloat to ashore that air force aeroplanes can create required effects and play a pivotal role in the success of the amphibious operation. This support can be easily provided by the fighter aircraft and the helicopters of the IAF and would be a potent force to facilitate rapid landings.

Advantages of an Operational Runway on Minicoy

To the east of Lakshadweep lie the Naval Command Headquarters of Cochin and Mumbai and the Southern Air Command in Trivandrum to ensure an effective military oversight. The runway on Minicoy, once constructed and operational, can prove invaluable in ensuring India's movement forward towards long-term security preparedness. The offensive aerial capabilities of nations are becoming increasingly lethal, and concurrently Indian military airpower has become progressively dominant; that it has become the nation's go-to weapon of choice was evident in the trans-border strike at Balakot and in the multiple joint military exercises with friendly nations and humanitarian missions across the globe. Airpower will continue to play a key role in the future of maritime interdiction. The nation's interest is tied to the value of open trade and commerce, hence waterways and ports remain important and the asymmetry of airpower provides great advantage. The following would be the major advantages of an operational runway on Minicoy:

- Wide area coverage
- Passive and active detection, classification and identification
- Continuous operations
- Real-time target tracking and reporting
- Targeting and strike support, including over-the-horizon targeting
- Timely and relevant threat indications and warnings
- Rapid and accurate battle damage assessment
- Provide India a massive regional engagement and it can support multiple tasks, including long-range surveillance, reconnaissance and incident response as well as deterrence and strike
- Boost India's capability to control sea lines of communication and bottle up enemy shipping when needed
- Free expensive naval assets for other tasks other than interdiction
- Allow the airpower over water to assist with detection of hostile targets at much greater ranges
- Allow controlling authorities to stand aircraft combat air patrols up or down and move them to different geographic locations as the threat dictates
- Let aircraft on combat air patrol to rapidly engage vessels or enemy airborne assets that emerge as threats as they approach or enter in proximity to Indian ports and vital installations
- Support air mobility to facilitate penetration through the third dimension, seize positions of relative advantage through amphibious operations and successive manoeuvre to new advantageous positions

- Degrade enemies' airpower effectively
- Reduce enemies' capabilities to interfere with own surface and subsurface forces
- Put a constraint on enemies' manoeuvrability and mobility
- Create an imbalance in enemies' force disposition
- Allow simultaneous targeting of multiple moving maritime targets
- Ensure that the IAF carries out concurrent operations
- Ensure a 360-degree eyeball
- Use of maritime fighters such as Sukhoi-30s and Jaguars that have long ranges and massive firepower will add a lethal punch in India's armoury

The dynamic joint operating constructs and agile tactical tools will provide the necessary supportive framework for our forces to thrive in complexity, take the right risks and defeat our adversaries cognitively whilst kinetically project the country beyond its international borders.

CONCLUSION

With the increased threats of a hegemonic Chinese and a spate of asymmetrical menace, India can ill afford to sit tight and allow things to escalate. With favoured holdings in our western flank the Indian effort must be to rapidly modernise the military presence in the Lakshadweep cluster of islands and build a runway post haste in Minicoy to mitigate a number of intimidating factors. Once constructed the runway will prove not only invaluable for the islanders but also boost India's muscular posture in the Indian Ocean, making big powers think twice before attempting provocative gestures. This in addition to enabling India to extend the arm of protection to smaller, like-minded countries will allow Lakshadweep to offer a secondary base for maritime co-operation with Mauritius, Seychelles and the Maldives.

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