

Andaman & Nicobar Command set to get IAF fighter base

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WITH A view to create a model for integration of three defence services, the government is moving ahead with plans to give more punch to the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command (ANC) by permanently stationing fighter jets and other combat platforms on the islands.

Sources in the Ministry of Defence told *The Indian Express* that air bases in Car Nicobar and Campbell Bay have been identified as possible bases to station the IAF fighters.

The IAF currently has only one Mi17V5 helicopter unit and two Dornier aircraft permanently stationed at ANC. There are limitations to the length of the runway, which do not allow the IAF to fully exploit the potential of its more modern aircraft on the island chain. The airstrip at Campbell Bay

is being extended to accommodate heavier aircraft. The air base at Car Nicobar is operational, but may need minor upgrades to house fighter jets permanently.

Declining to comment on the shortage of IAF fighter squadrons, the sources suggested that the defence services will have to reprioritise their resources for the task. The IAF currently has 31 fighter squadrons against an authorisation of 42. The Army, sources added, has manpower available under “save and raise” schemes to raise new units for ANC, if required.

This is first time after World War II that fighters will be permanently stationed on the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Although this will strengthen India’s reach over the crucial Malacca, Sunda and Lombok Strait and the Straits of Ombai Wetar and the eastern Indian Ocean Region, the Ministry is also attempting to create a model integrated theatre com-

mand which can then be replicated elsewhere.

ANC was established in October 2001 following the recommendations of the Group of Ministers on National Security, but has failed to realise its full potential because of turf wars among the three services, environmental concerns at the islands and shortage of funds.

The Army and the IAF see it mainly as a Navy base, where the Navy has positioned about 19 capital warships in the area and has built two floating docks to repair and refurbish warships.

The Army has only one brigade of two battalions under the direct control of ANC.

“The issue (of building ANC as a model integrated theatre command) is being pursued vigorously at the highest levels in the Ministry,” sources said, adding that the initial reluctance of the defence services has been “overcome to a great extent”.