

China builds air assets in Tibet, Indian missile units head east

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NEW DELHI, DECEMBER 20

EXTENSIVE EXERCISES by the People's Liberation Army Air Force (PLAAF), the Chinese air force, in the Tibet Autonomous Region (TAR) across the disputed Line of Actual Control (LAC), and enhancement of Chinese aviation infrastructure in the region, have prompted the Indian Air Force (IAF) to activate plans for greater deterrence in the eastern sector, including deployment of six units of the Akash missile system.

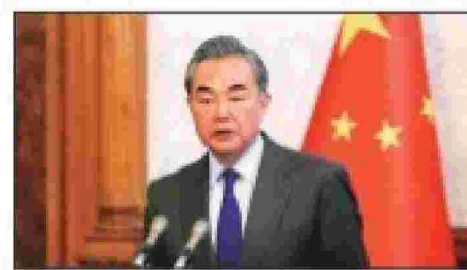
For the contentious eastern border with China, the IAF also plans to deploy a squadron each of Chinook and Apache helicopters, besides the Russian S-400 missile system and a squadron of the Rafale fighter aircraft. While the induction of Chinook and Apache helicopters is scheduled to be completed by 2020, the S-400 air defence missile system and Rafale fighter jets will be inducted by 2021, sources said.

Discussions are also underway for induction of one more squadron of the Sukhoi Su-30MKI fighters in the region, in response to increased Chinese activity across the LAC.

A senior IAF officer told *The Indian Express*: "Chinese Air Force has started building infrastructure in the TAR since Doklam (the border standoff in 2017). The IAF has moved six units of Akash here since August 2014. That place has never had any air defence SAM until now."

"The IAF has increased surveillance. On the one hand, infrastructure is increasing, but at the

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same time the Chinese troops are being provided with three-storey buildings visible from across the border. with central heating etc," the officer said.

Intelligence inputs from TAR have reported that in recent exercises, the Chinese Air Force has been practising a new method of mobilisation using the military and civil transport infrastructure chain.

According to intelligence reports, a new airfield is under construction 136 km southwest of Xining in Qinghai, only 750 km from the LAC. In addition, three new airports are coming up in TAR: Lhuntse, Tingri and Purang, which are in India's vicinity.

The capacity of the civil airport at Gonggar is being enhanced, and work will be completed by 2020, reports suggest. It will be then expected to handle nine million tourists and 80,000 tonnes of cargo, making it fit for heavy military usage. The runway length of Hotan airfield is being increased as well. In September, the Rikaze-Xigaze-Jinan air route was opened in Tibet.