

Analysis of Chinese Espionage Operations from Coco Islands

Introduction:

On 31 March 2023, Chatham House, a British think tank, published reports that there were military modernization and construction activities being carried out on the Coco Islands in the Bay of Bengal. As per satellite images, it was observed that there are two new hangars, a new causeway, and what appears to be an accommodation block, all of which are visible in proximity to a freshly lengthened 2,300-meter runway and radar station. These points toward future facilities to support aircraft, but whether Myanmar's or Chinese aircraft, it's still not clear. There are further signs of future constructions. This raises concerns for Indian security establishments because these islands lie just 55 kilometers north of India's strategic Andaman and Nicobar Islands.[i]

Importance of Andaman & Coco Islands:

The Andaman and Nicobar Islands play a strategic role in India's dominance in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR). Firstly, it has evolved into a tri-service territorial command of the Indian Armed Forces with anti-access capabilities. India has been upgrading the Andaman & Nicobar Islands as a strategic forward outpost armed with sea-denial assets to deter rival powers. Secondly, under the military logistics support agreements of India with all QUAD countries and other certain littoral states, the Andaman & Nicobar Islands will be a strategic springboard for the Indian Navy and its alliances to project power deep inside the Indian Ocean.

On the other hand, the Coco Islands also have geostrategic importance from Myanmar's or China's point of view. It lies at the geographically strategic location that can take control of the important Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) as well as the northeastern part of the Indian Ocean and the Malacca Strait. It forms three important channels that also act as a critical international maritime trade route because most of the commercial ships coming from the Malacca Strait pass through these channels.[ii]

A naval radar station was established there in the late 20th century. Theories and speculations about China using the Coco Islands as a signal intelligence (SIGINT) base have been doing the rounds since the early 1990s. It was rumored that a 45-50-meter antenna tower on Great Coco, equipped with signals intercept equipment, was established by the Chinese military. Later, the antenna tower was said to be turned into a full signals intelligence post.

India's Security Concerns:

The present evidence from Chatham House, if found to be real, can cause serious issues for Indian assets and military facilities in the Andaman Islands because Chinese SIGINT operations can extract valuable information from there. If Myanmar were to establish the base fully, surveillance flights could track movements to and from the Andaman and Nicobar Islands. Given China's well-established intelligence practices, local intelligence from Great Coco could find its way, either through espionage or consent, to Shanghai.[iii]

Also, just as we have noticed all over the world, the use of Chinese fishing trawlers as a form of Human Intelligence (HUMINT) gathering tool cannot be denied in the future if China and Myanmar agree to establish fishing activities in the waters around these Coco Islands. This is based on the fact that Myanmar needs funds and support in the face of western sanctions, and

China can exploit this situation in its favour. We have seen such fishing activities in the South China Sea (SCS), where China is using aggressive behaviour to deny access to other fishermen, claim maritime territory as well as carry out espionage operations.[iv]

On the other hand, there is also a high chance that the 'Tatmadaw' (official name of Myanmar's army) military chief has certain plans to make effective use of the strategic position of the Coco Islands. His strategic anticipations and future plans for its geostrategic advantages might cover the fact that dominance over the waters around Coco Island will act as a 'Choke Point' which can provide security to the international maritime trade and energy routes. Even in that case, it will be beneficial to China only, because it will solve its 'Malacca Strait Dilemma' where the Indian Navy has a clear advantage.[v]

Recommendations to counter future Chinese espionage:

As per the Chatham House Report, there are two aspects of the militarization of Coco Islands: one is the construction of runways, hangars, causeways, etc. The other is the presence and upgrading of radar stations, etc., which can be used to collect intelligence. In the future, if the runway becomes operational, China can also use this to conduct aerial flights over the Andaman Islands to spy on Indian military assets.

Regarding the construction activities, there is little now India can do apart from diplomatic means to signal to Myanmar that in the future, any activities harmful to India's interests should be avoided. The problem here is that Myanmar will definitely agree, but it can't be guaranteed that Myanmar will stop China from conducting any spying operations.

The question now arises: how to prevent SIGINT activities in the future? SIGINT operations are mainly of two types. One is Electronic Intelligence (ELINT), and the other is Communication Intelligence (COMINT). ELINT is concerned with the interception and analysis of emissions from foreign electronic devices. The most common ELINT targets are the wide variety of radar systems used around the world for early warning, missile detection, ground control intercept, missile targeting, fighter target vectoring, and altitude determination. Through ELINT, these radar systems can be identified by their function and type, their range and capabilities assessed, and their locations precisely fixed. COMINT is intelligence information derived from the intercept and processing of voice, Morse code, radio teletype, facsimile, multichannel (or microwave radio relay), and video signals. COMINT does not include the interception of unencrypted written communications (mail).

Hence the way ahead will be devising methods to counter these ELINT & COMINT operations. These include:

(i) Deniability: Access to SIGINT data can be denied by the use of encryption and other secure forms of communications, such as landline telephone and telegraph circuits, or more recently, fiber-optic cables. Other examples include frequency-hopping radios, burst transmission technology, citizen-band radios, satellite telephones, and even sophisticated encryption technology.

(ii) Using Deception: SIGINT is vulnerable to communications deception. But to achieve this, robust training needs to be provided to the communication operators.

(iii) Exploiting Technical Vulnerability: SIGINT's ability to perform effectively is subject to the vagaries of atmospheric conditions and solar flare activities. For example, SIGINT operations

can be forced to shut down because of atmospheric anomalies, which can prevent the station's operators from hearing any high-frequency signals.

(iv) Exploiting Terrain Vulnerability: Terrain is also a significant limiting factor. For example, SIGINT intercept operators have historically experienced great difficulty copying radio signals emanating from urban areas, densely wooded terrain, or mountainous regions. Finally, radio interference coming from major urban areas or industrial activities in the vicinity of the listening post can wreak havoc with radio intercept operations.[vi]

Conclusion:

From the above brief analysis, it can be concluded that although the militarization of Coco Islands can be a security concern for India, there is also scope for countering the spying and espionage activities, if any, using both traditional and modern-day technology.

References

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[iii] Damien Symon, John Pollock, *ibid.*

[iv] Masaaki Yatsuzuka, "How China's maritime militia takes advantage of the grey zone", Australian Strategic Policy Institute, 16 January, 2023, <https://www.aspistrategist.org.au/how-chinas-maritime-militia-takes-advantage-of-the-grey-zone/>

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[vi] Matthijs R. Koot, "Sigint: definition, qualities, problems and limitations (quotes from Aid & Wiebes, 2001)", Matthijs R. Koot's notebook, 3 October 2014, <https://blog.cyberwar.nl/2014/10/sigint-definition-intrinsic-qualities-problems-and-limitations-quotes-from-aid-wiebes-2001/>

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