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FROM COASTLINE TO FRONTLINE: MARITIME SECURITY AS INDIA'S INTERNAL SECURITY PILLAR

Terrorists and traffickers have learnt to use the sea against the Indian state. We must stop thinking of the coast as the periphery of the internal-security map and start thinking of it as one of its hubs, because if the land border is India's visible shield, the coastline is its hidden frontline.



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India's internal-security imagination has always been land-centric, for defensible historical reasons. Yet the most consequential breach of the Indian homeland in a generation arrived not by land route: it came over water, aboard a hijacked fishing trawler. Nearly two decades after the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai, maritime security still sits at the margin of internal-security planning, parked with the Navy and the Coast Guard, while the police function is treated as residual. That allocation no longer corresponds to the threat. Terrorism, narcotics, trafficking, hostile reconnaissance and grey-zone pressure now moves through the maritime domain and terminate inside district police jurisdictions. The coastline must be looked upon as an active internal-security frontline and not a distant border because marine policing must be conceived of as an extremely specialised and professional arm at the very center of national preparedness, and not an appendage to it.

WHY MARITIME SECURITY IS INTERNAL SECURITY

The geography alone should give any internal-security planner nightmares because in April 2025, the Ministry of Ports, Shipping and Waterways, Government of India, revised the official length of India's coastline from 7,516.6 km to 11,098.81 km, after more detailed measurement at last counted the creeks and offshore islets that earlier maps had simply glossed over. Nothing changed in the real world; however, what changed was the honest measure of how exposed we are, and of the policing burden that comes with



Visakhapatnam Port

Marine policing must be conceived of as an extremely specialised and professional arm at the very center of national preparedness

that exposure, which is shared by nine coastal states and four Union Territories, although they have very unequal stretches of coastline. Strung along that edge are thirteen major ports and over two hundred smaller ports, through which about 95 per cent of India's trade by volume flows, and they are next to refineries, naval bases, shipyards, and some of the densest urban clusters in Asia, including Mumbai, Kochi, Chennai, Visakhapatnam, Mangaluru, and Kolkata. Far out at sea, the Andaman and Nicobar Islands and Lakshadweep stretch India's reach deep into the sea lanes that carry much of the world's oil supplies.

A threat that crosses this coastline edge changes its legal character as it lands. A consignment carrying heroin is a naval interception issue till it is at sea;

once its cargo is offloaded in a creek in Kutch, it becomes a case file in a district court, because it becomes a crime scene. Infiltration, smuggling, trafficking, and sabotage follow the same script: they are planned overseas, executed over water, and completed on land under police jurisdiction. They show up as FIRs and law-and-order crises, not naval battles, because they fall under police jurisdiction. That is why maritime security must be treated as an internal security issue in India's security calculus.

LESSONS FROM 26/11 AND POST-26/11 REFORMS

The true lesson of the 26/11 terrorist attack in Mumbai does not lie in the horror of its scale, but in the way our institutions were structured. The threat from the sea was known, but tracking vessels was no one's job, and the 10 terrorists who sailed the hijacked trawler Kuber from Karachi to Badhar Park slipped through the edges of every agency's jurisdiction without becoming the responsibility of any one of them. The method was hardly new, since the RDX for the 1993 Bombay blasts had landed at Dighi and Shekhadi on the Raigad district coast of Maharashtra.



26/11 Mumbai terrorist attack

India has largely answered the question of who owns what at sea since 2008. The Navy was given charge of overall maritime security in 2009, the Coast Guard of territorial waters, and state marine police of the near-shore belt, a three-tier system that has been strengthened by hardware and infrastructure. The number of coastal police stations increased from seventy-three to a sanctioned total of more than two hundred, and a coastal radar chain of forty-six static stations was installed, to be supplemented by thirty-eight more and four mobile stations in a second phase. The Information Management and Analysis Centre in Gurugram has been fusing feeds from fifty-one connected Navy and Coast Guard stations into a single operational picture since 2014, and over it is an identity layer consisting of biometric cards, colour-coded boats, online registries and mandatory transponders for vessels above twenty metres. But all these reforms didn't fix one key issue of asymmetry between the three tiers. The first two tiers are professional services; but the third remains an under-resourced afterthought.

EMERGING MARITIME THREAT MATRIX

The threat matrix into which this uneven system must perform has widened well past the Mumbai terror attack in 2008. Seaborne infiltration has not gone away. India has to patrol a coastline dominated

They show up as FIRs and law-and-order crises, not naval battles, because they fall under police jurisdiction

by an estimated 250,000 fishing boats and over a thousand landing sites. No radar can tell you what someone is thinking, therefore a small boat costing a few lakh rupees can still beat a billion-rupee surveillance system if nobody is watching when it lands.

Narcotics have become the most lucrative use of that cover, and the Makran coast has become a major conduit for Afghan opiates and synthetic drugs into the Arabian Sea, with seizures growing to an industrial scale. In February 2024, Indian agencies intercepted a foreign fishing vessel off Gujarat, carrying some 3,300 kg of narcotics, which was the largest offshore seizure in Indian history, and in April 2025, the Gujarat Anti-Terrorist Squad and the Coast Guard pursued a consignment of methamphetamine worth almost Rs 1,800 crore, jettisoned by smugglers as they tried to cross the maritime boundary line. Each load that gets through funds organised crime onshore, and some of the money goes to far darker ends.



Indian Navy in a coordinated ops with Narcotics Control Bureau, apprehended a suspicious dhow carrying almost 3300Kgs contraband (3089 Kgs Charas, 158 Kgs Methamphetamine 25 Kgs Morphine). The largest seizure of narcotics, in quantity in recent times



The UN refugee agency has raised the alarm for an estimated 400 Rohingya Muslims believed to be aboard two boats reported to be out of supplies and adrift in the Andaman Sea

Sea smuggling and human trafficking is even older and has far more low-visibility. The Rohingya boats in the Bay of Bengal and the Andaman Sea, and decades of unofficial travel across the Straits in the Indian Ocean, allow them to blend into India's coastal districts without papers, and the policing fallout of these quiet, unnoticed arrivals only becomes evident years later, in identity fraud cases, and suspicions of induction into criminal or extremist networks.

The ports themselves are now as much targets as they are gateways, because in 2017, a Petya cyber-attack shut down the Maersk-operated terminal at Jawaharlal Nehru Port without a shot being fired. Moreover, most of India's international data flows through a handful of undersea cables that come

ashore mostly at Mumbai and Chennai. The newest threats are the cheapest, and the Red Sea and the Black Sea have shown what drones and unmanned surface vessels can do to high-value maritime assets. The drone-smuggling route across the Punjab border shows that technique drifting steadily south.

IMPORTANCE OF THE NEW MARINE POLICING CONCEPT

The institutional answer cannot be a marginal strengthening of what exists. Most of the coastal states view marine police as an extension of land police. The same personnel and the same training are used for marine policing, but this has proven unsuccessful because we must approach this task as an entirely new profession. Marine policing requires its own nautical expertise, its own seamanship, its own body of ocean laws, and its own intelligence tradecraft, and its own risk profile, otherwise it will continue to underperform until it is organised as per today's requirements.

A capable marine police unit must patrol near-shore waters and creeks, checks vessels against registries, boards and searches suspect craft underway, while also watching landing points and fish-landing centres, guarding waterfront infrastructure and coastal events, building harbour-level intelligence from crews and traders,



Vice Admiral G Ashok Kumar (Retd), assumed charge as the country first National Maritime Security Coordinator (NMSC)

and should be acting as first responder when a seaborne threat comes ashore. Search-and-rescue and disaster response are the primary tasks through which the marine police unit builds reputation in the community between crises, because each task is conceptually simple, yet highly specialised in execution.

Capability requirements follow from the functions. Serviceability matters more than acquisition. Workshops, spares, fuel budgets and jetties determine availability more than platform numbers do. Radios and communications systems must actually inter-operate with Coast Guard and Navy counterparts, not just coexist, because tracking devices must be standard operating procedure, not crisis-activated. The legal component is similarly underdeveloped, therefore officers require practical experience with marine crime and collecting evidence at sea, where jurisdiction and chain of custody have no terrestrial analog and few precedents exist, thus a conviction is lost at sea long before it is lost in court.

Another choke point is that the cadre policy, and Marine policing requires a separate, dedicated institutional training system that covers navigation, boat handling, boarding operations, maritime law, investigation of crime at sea, and counter-terror response in and around harbours. The posting system has to let people stay in long enough to build the required expertise.

The argument for building this capability inside the state police forces, rather than just pushing the central maritime forces further inshore, is structural, because it is the police who owns the criminal intelligence networks, the statutory powers of investigation, the working relationships with district authorities and the daily local presence that no central force can match. Since the threat ends up coming ashore and becoming the police's problem, the capability to respond has to be there too.

INTER-AGENCY COORDINATION AND FEDERAL CHALLENGES

No coast in the world is looked after by a single agency. Indian waters are more crowded as compared with coastal areas of other parts of the world. The Navy, Coast Guard, marine police, Customs, intelligence agencies, fisheries departments, port authorities, immigration, and the district administration all have a claim to the same patch of sea because the problem isn't the number of uniforms out there, but the gaps between them. Most of the time, information travels by slow liaison letters rather than live data links; radios do not talk to each other at sea; command cultures read urgency differently; and jurisdiction boundaries that exist on paper, but not on any chart. The appointment of Vice Admiral G. Ashok Kumar (Retd) as India's first National Maritime Security Coordinator in February 2022 acknowledged the problem of coordination at the highest level.

There is also a constitutional challenge in marine policing because police is a state subject. Some states have built creditable marine wings while others have let centrally funded assets rust. Maritime internal security therefore demands a genuine coastal federalism. States must be co-authors of doctrine, not recipients of direction, and funding should be tied to serviceability rather than acquisition.

TECHNOLOGY, INTELLIGENCE AND COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

It is in maritime domain awareness that India has since 2008 made its most visible progress, but in a form so centralised that its utility for internal security is limited. The coastal radar chain and transponder network now gives national headquarters a surface picture that did not exist before 2008. The second phase of the surveillance network is extending that coverage.



Coastal police patrolling the sea onboard Kaveri

India has largely answered the question of who owns what at sea since 2008

The shortfall lies in the dissemination of that picture to States marine police. State control rooms and coastal police stations need direct, real-time access to the slice of the common operating picture that is relevant to them, and information must be able to flow back up just as easily, because no sensor can, on its own, convey the intent of a boat under twenty meters. Technology has its own structural limitations. Human intelligence can fill in the blind spots. Fishing communities spot anomalies well before any agency does. Since 26/11, policy has acknowledged calling fishers the “eyes and ears” of coastal security.

WAY FORWARD

India's first requirement is a comprehensive national marine-policing doctrine, that should be drafted jointly by the Centre and the coastal

states, laying down roles, standards, equipment scales and the reform paths. The modernisation of coastal police stations should be judged by the fact that their boats are put to sea at night, whether the crews are staying long enough to know their waters, and whether proper training institutions exist to support them. State police forces need a seat inside the maritime domain awareness system. Harbour intelligence networks deserve the investment that urban beat policing once received, and ports need cyber-resilience as serious as perimeter fencing. Joint exercises should be organised between central and state forces.

Terrorists and traffickers have learnt to use the sea against the Indian state. We must stop thinking of the coast as the periphery of the internal-security map and start thinking of it as one of its hubs, because if the land border is India's visible shield, the coastline is its hidden frontline. The coastline is now an internal-security frontline, and the police tier of its defence needs rebuilding as a modern profession. ❤️