

India's Maritime Challenges in the 21st Century

Captain Dr.V.Venkatesulu

Head Department of Political Science

S.V College, Suryapet District

INTRODUCTION:

Today there is no single government agency, which has either the span of responsibility or the authority to act as the focal point for India's maritime policies and interests. No one, which has the physical means to exercise control over the myriad activities that take place on and under the oceans. As many as sixteen different ministries, departments or organizations, (including the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard), are involved in ocean-related matters, and much of the time the left hand does not know what the right is doing. The result is confusion, crossed wires and compromised national security.

The country neglected its maritime security and maritime economy in the past. We have neglected our maritime economy as well as maritime security. The government has been paying greater attention to both. Centre has modernised ports, improved port efficiency and increased investment in port development. On the defence forces front that the Centre has increased investment in Coast Guard and Indian Navy.

Coast guard should be upgraded further in quality to serve India. The coast guard is not a navy in the military sense and also in its design. No coast guards are alike for at least now. Their similarities lie in the commonality of role definition—enforcement and service. There are also navies that perform these functions and coast guards that may be deployed for war fighting or high end roles where there is no navy. There are also other maritime forces along with the coast guards who perform part of the role of the coast guards for enforcement and services. These factors are based on their evolution and purpose. It is also important to understand that the coast guard is not a recent concept. Incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships are a cause of concern to all and to the shipping industry in particular. Instances of pirate attacks in the Arabian sea and more recently in the Indian Ocean much beyond the piracy infested areas of Gulf of Aden pose a serious threat to by putting at risk a large number of Indian seafarers and ships as also our sea-borne trade.

As our maritime sector, including shipping ports, ship-building and ship repair is of vital significance to our economy, we should collectively make every effort for growth of this sector. However, we should also ensure adequate Indian control over our maritime activity for reasons of maritime security. There is need to evolve a strategic consensus and agreement among different nations for a common legal and judicial framework to combat the growing menace of terrorism and piracy through sea routes. Navy, Coastguard and shipping companies are putting up a concerted effort in close co-ordination with other international agencies to deal with this menace terrorist outfits abusing navigation communication technology, making dents into maritime security, throwing new challenges to security forces and pushing the world to destructive mentality. There is a

need for co-ordination and evolving consensus between diplomatic and military forces. Need to ensure that no terrorist attack takes place along the sea coast in a country like India which has a long coastline.

In the backdrop of the Mumbai terror attacks exposing the chinks in coastal security, designated the navy as the central authority responsible for the country's overall maritime security. The Navy will be assisted by Coast Guard state marine police and central agencies for the coastal defence of the nation. Observing that the 26/11 attacks have shaken the entire nation and brought out the need for strengthening coastal security, the government has approved certain important measures for strengthening maritime and coastal security against the threat from the sea. Against the backdrop of multiple agencies involved in coastal security and the resultant problems of coordination, the Navy has been designated as the authority responsible for maritime security.

The impact of internal conflicts in the neighbouring maritime countries will only accelerate the development and recognition of the coast guard in India and, along with it, its professional acuity and competence. However, its work culture can be seriously affected if it loses its independence to perform according to the Act or its personnel quality standards decline in the absence of accountability. For a service like the coast guard constructive interaction with law enforcement and disaster management is vital that comes only under operational freedom or positive jointness. These are for the government to examine.

The economic and security repercussions of such moves have been the subject of intense scrutiny and analysis by our strategic and security experts. The naval outreach and capability of a number of countries has been growing in the Indian Ocean region. Our own capability to be infrastructure builders in our immediate neighbourhood and region needs to be enhanced significantly. Our naval cooperation in the neighbourhood needs further stepping up. Capacity building, training, equipment and vessel supply are all areas that need further attention. With the region, we need to build a common vision of maritime security, conflict prevention, the unhindered passage of trade, counter terrorism and piracy, disaster prevention and humanitarian relief, and the peaceful settlement of disputes, in a balanced and inclusive manner that safeguards these regional and global commons.

It goes without saying that our ability to shape our maritime security environment will require the development of a credible naval presence with adequate assets commensurate with our defence and security interests as well as those required to discharge the role and responsibility expected of India by the international community. As a diplomatic instrument, the Navy has key attributes- access, mobility, reach and versatility. We need to embed these attributes within the larger vision of India's role in the global arena. A flexible but proactive maritime doctrine is essential to safeguard and project our national interests overseas. The Navy and our foreign policy establishment need to establish closer coordination in this regard.

India has very significant maritime stakes in the Indian Ocean. We have a coast line of over 7500 kms. Between the Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar chains we have over 600 islands, with the southernmost tip just 90 nautical miles from Indonesia and the northern most tip less than 10 nautical miles from Myanmar. In terms of maritime security terms these are significant assets. Our EEZ is more than 2.5 million square KMs. The mining areas of over 150,000 sq KMs allotted to India under UNCLOS are about 2000 kms from our southernmost tip. We have significant interests in Antarctica as well.

For several decades, India was the only Asian country to possess an aircraft carrier. Our naval force posture in the coming years will require the necessary capabilities in terms of reach, sustaining power and sea control. Apart from Search and Rescue, the areas covered for such security cooperation include curbing – terrorism, piracy and trafficking of drugs, small arms and humans.

On terrorism, India needs extensive cooperation with the ASEAN countries because many of its terrorist and insurgent groups depend upon arms shipments and financial transactions passing through the ASEAN countries. India is also actively cooperating in intelligence sharing with the eastern neighbours in this regard and other arrangements such as Container Security Initiative. The Container Security Initiative and the Proliferation Security Initiative are manifestations of this trend. This will require the Indian Navy to patrol its area of interest, and work with other Navies, much more than it has done in the past.

India is a maritime country and its future lies at Sea in more ways than one – not just for “nuclear deterrence” but also for trade, economic prosperity, influence, diplomatic initiatives and a host of other things. For far too long we have been calling the Indian Ocean our “Backyard”. It is now our front yard. Today, more than ever before, India is reaching out – engaging the world, talking to the world and trading with the world. That world lies across the Oceans, not across the Himalayas. To reach that world, to engage that world, to influence that world and to ensure and enhance our Security, we need to expand and modernise our Navy. While the Indian Navy has come a long way since independence, and is today “Steady and On Course” towards a bright future, the pace of expansion and modernisation needs to be speeded up if it is to adequately support India’s standing in the comity of nations in the 21st century.

Securing long coastline is a serious challenge for India. In 2007 the Government sanctioned Rs 500 crores to implement a four-year plan to strengthen the coastal security infrastructure and prevent acts of terrorism in India’s territorial waters. Strangely, while Mumbai 26/11 apparently woke the country out of slumber, security analysts have been warning about some disturbing scenarios of what terrorism in the seas could be like. Also, several ports in India categorized as minor ports fall under the State Government’s control and these ports could be more vulnerable to maritime terrorism. In the meantime, basic security drill like access control, surveillance systems, I-cards for employees and so on should be immediately implemented in all ports in India. Primary key to India’s emergence as a successful global power lies on the ability to acquire and imbibe superior defence technologies in the knowledge-based society of the 21st century.

CONCLUSION:

India's primary maritime agencies like the IN, the ICG, along with the Marine Police, Customs, and the offshore oil rigs with their supporting supply vessels, need adequate funding to be put on a simple Indian MDA grid. The IN and ICG need to greatly increase their existing force levels and complement each other in the global fight against maritime terrorism. The Navy has to be always prepared for its traditional conventional roles, even though, in the present days "global terrorism" environment of "no war-no peace", a conventional war may appear to be unlikely. Exercising with all regional and important extra-regional navies, since such exercises, enhance mutual understanding and help in "building bridges of friendship across the seas". In certain cases they enhance our war fighting skills by exposure to new platforms, equipment and concepts. In addition they improve interoperability, which would help in humanitarian disaster relief missions, or during UN sponsored peace keeping or anti-piracy or anti-terrorism operations. Here, as a major nation on an economic upswing. India must also encourage contacts and exercises between its Navy and Coast Guard with their counterparts from China, Pakistan and Iran.

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