

# POLICING THE SEA

Despite attacks by terrorist from the sea, the focus on maritime security remains inadequate



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**An Indian Coast Guard helicopter and ship take part in an exercise off the coast of Porbandar in the Arabian Sea**



### KEY POINTS

- A silver lining to the 26/11 attacks is India's renewed focus on its long-neglected maritime domain.
- The country's nine coastal States have woefully inadequate marine police capacity.
- With the surge in acquisitions and increase in personnel, it is envisaged that by 2012, the Indian Coastal Guard will be a 100-ship/100-aircraft force, putting it among the world's top four coast guards.

India's maritime challenges and opportunities are best illustrated if the map of the Subcontinent—traditionally projected with a north-south orientation—is reversed. Peninsular India is the only sizeable landmass that straddles one of the world's three navigable oceans in a manner that provides enormous opportunities and complex challenges to national security. The paradox is that the politics, and hence history of modern India, is decided in Delhi that is determinedly sea-blind and consequently unable to harness opportunity or cope with challenges appropriately.

The macro-security concerns range from easy access to the peninsula through the seas to trade-energy dependence and the inexorable compulsions of the Weapons of Mass Destruction-driven strategic arena. The vulnerability was agonisingly exposed on November 26, 2008, when Mumbai was attacked by a group of ruthless terrorists who used the sea routes to enter the city. Interrogation of the lone perpetrator, currently in Indian custody,

indicates clear linkages with Pakistan and the country's support to terrorism.

Currently, India is reviewing the tragic fall-out of what is now referred to as 26/11; while the death and destruction has been considerable there is also a welcome element of determination to learn from the enormity of the tragedy. But, as in most national security experiences, India learns reluctantly.

A silver lining to 26/11 lies in the Indian State's renewed focus on its long-neglected maritime domain. It has long been averred that Independent India has been indifferent to its long coastline and distant island territories and that after the 1962 war with China the security fixation with the land borders has been pronounced. The sovereignty of the anxious post-colonial State is inextricably linked with a heightened sensitivity about territoriality and its purported loss.

Almost 46 years after the ignominy of the war with China, the trauma of 26/11 has compelled the Indian State to move with urgency to redress the many gaps in its maritime security. It merits repetition that while the Mumbai tragedy has exposed the vulnerability of the Indian coastline, the spectrum of challenges in the maritime domain range from nuclear deterrence to monitoring suspicious boats and related illegal activities across a 7,600 km-long coastline and in the far-flung islands in the Bay of Bengal and the Arabian Sea.

The Indian Navy (IN) and the Indian Coast Guard (ICG), formed on February 1, 1977, are the primary agencies responsible for maritime and coastal security with the State marine police assuming the responsibility of the waters contiguous to the shore. It is instructive that, historically, India has

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been indifferent to the challenges and opportunities posed by its maritime expanse and historians aver that this trait led to the later colonisation of the Subcontinent. The Navy was and is the proverbial Cinderella service with the lowest personnel strength and the smallest budgetary allocation of the total Defence Budget. The manpower ratio of the Army, Air Force and Navy stands at 22:2:1—in overall terms, the 50,000 plus naval strength is dwarfed by the million plus Indian Army. Predictably, the fiscal allocations follow the same pattern, with the Navy receiving the smallest share of the defence cake.

## Low Budget

The budget figures of the last two years are instructive. In FY 2008-09, the total Indian defence expenditure (DE) was budgeted at Rs 105,600 crore (\$ 22.95 billion at current exchange rates) and the naval portion was Rs 18,797 crore (\$4.1 billion); this works out to a share of 17.8 percent—an improvement from the single digit figures of earlier decades. However, in FY 2009-10 the total DE has gone up to Rs 141,703 crore (\$30.8 billion), the total naval allocation has been pegged at Rs 19,656 crore (\$4.27 billion)—only 13.8 percent of the total Indian defence outlay.

In other words, there has been a drop in the naval budget as a percentage of the overall Defence Budget. The increase in FY 2008-2009 was in part due to the focus on the Indian Coast Guard after the Mumbai tragedy. To augment the existing force-levels, the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS) sanctioned 40 ships, 20 boats and 42 aircraft for the ICG in February 2009. Shortly thereafter, the Government also accorded Acceptance of Necessity for 7 offshore patrol vessels, 20 fast patrol vessels and 12 Dornier aircraft. The induction of these platforms in the near future will significantly enhance the ICG's operational capability. It is pertinent that as many as five ships, including one advanced offshore vessel, were commissioned in the ICG during 2009.

On the infrastructure front, the CCS sanctioned 9 stations and the regional headquarters (North-West), along with requisite manpower, to cover the vulnerable gaps along the coast. The new regional headquarters in Gujarat and ICG stations at Gandhinagar, Vadinar, Karwar, Veraval and Hut Bay were com-

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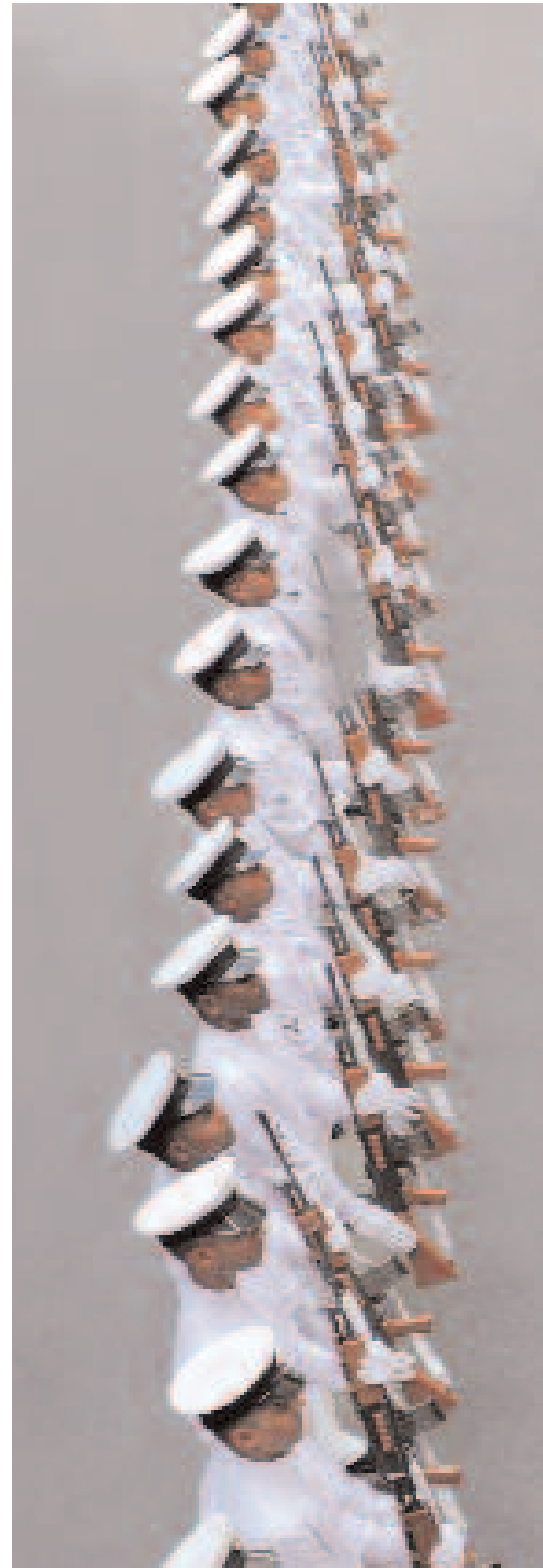


missioned or activated in record time during the year.

To man these new platforms and stations, the Government has sanctioned as many as 3,229 additional personnel, when fully implemented these inductions will dramatically alter the profile of the ICG. Not since the 1962 war, when the Indian Army was given a dramatic fillip, has the Centre acted with such alacrity to augment the capacity of an individual armed force. The scale of the increase may be gauged from the fact that currently the ICG has 43 ships, about 25 craft/boats of different types and 45 aircraft, which are manned by about 7,500 personnel. With the surge in acquisitions and increase in personnel, it is envisaged that by 2012, the ICG will be a 100-ship/100-aircraft force, putting it among the world's top four coast guards.

The technology augmentation by way of enhancing coastal surveillance is also sizeable. Phase 1 of the critical surveillance network includes an upgrade of 46 coastal stations/lighthouses that will receive new radars, cameras, Automatic Identification Systems and related sensors.

On the eve of Coast Guard Day, Director-General of the Indian Coast Guard, Vice Admiral Anil Chopra, on whose watch these steps have been





Gujarat State Governor Dr. Kamla Beniwal at the inauguration ceremony of the regional headquarters of the Indian Coast Guard in Gandhinagar

AFP

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taken, asserted: “After Phase II with 56 additional stations, there will not be a single place along the coast not under radar coverage.”

This entire coastal network will be linked to the national grid to provide real time maritime domain awareness and integrate this information and intelligence with the Navy’s operational commands.

## **Sustained Capacity Building**

On the face of it, this proposed enhancement of the ICG is very impressive but these remain plans that are yet to be fully implemented and address only one part of the maritime spectrum. The abiding challenge to India’s holistic maritime security can be conceptually predicated on a tripod of sustained capacity building—inventory and human—across the many agencies responsible for the maritime domain; regular coordination among the principal actors involved in the maritime arena; and the quality of the Indian politico-military leadership

**An Indian Coast Guard Chetak helicopter flies over Sikka Port in the Gulf of Kutch during an exercise; (right) Indian soldiers take cover near Mumbai’s coastline during the 26/11 attacks**

across the board (meaning Centre and State) that will have to respond effectively to any security challenges that may arise.

While the ICG has received a special focus in the aftermath of the Mumbai attack, it will be misleading to infer that this one initiative will redress the many gaps in India’s maritime security. The lower end of the security spectrum encompasses the possibility that LIC (low intensity conflict) will acquire a maritime dimension and Mumbai is a reminder, if it were needed. But as any objective study of the pattern of terrorist attacks reveals, it is very unlikely that another 26/11 will be attempted by use of maritime ingress. And in the event of such an exigency, the primary responsibility on the shore and the proximate waters lies with the State police and their marine component.

Regrettably, this is one of the weakest links in the overall maritime security chain. India’s nine coastal States have one common feature: woefully inadequate

marine police capacity. Speedboats and patrol craft are limited and their maintenance pathetic. The personnel who man these vessels are poorly trained and have little motivation. However, the overall command and control of the local police—whether marine, car-borne or in police posts—lies with the individual States and they are loath to cede any power and space to the Centre. The entire local police recruitment process is rife with malpractices and the political masters treat these personnel very shabbily.

It is often averred that India’s LIC challenges, including the left wing Maoist movement, have their origins in the sub-optimal policing of the States. Much of the smuggling and related crime, including syndicates linked to the Gulf, have their origins in the sea and in the maritime domain—Mumbai’s underworld with its close proximity to the local police and their political patrons is a case in point. Hence, if India’s coastal security is to be improved, the first rung at the local, State and major port level—be it marine police or revenue officials—will need to



have an ethos and professionalism that is very different from what prevails among the local police. Given the close nexus between some sections of the Indian politico-bureaucratic-police establishment and the criminal/terrorist constituency, this will be the single-most difficult challenge to the management of coastal security.

The second element of improved maritime security lies in the coordination and sharing of resources between the Indian Navy and the ICG. While post-Mumbai, the ICG has been designated as the sole authority responsible for coastal security within territorial waters and for the overall coordination between Central and State agencies in all matters relating to coastal security, the actual implementation of this mandate will be tricky and is yet to be tested. The ICG is the younger service in relation to the Indian Navy and its assets are more modest. The civil-military interface as translated into Central Government ministries is fraught with multiple sensitivities and needs an empathy factor that has eluded the Indian higher-defence systemic.

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Maritime security for a nation like India cannot be predicated on the mere accretion of platforms and personnel. By its very nature, the trans-border and inherently flexible nature of the maritime medium calls for a texture of leadership that is dynamic, confident and innovative in its ability to respond to situations as they arise.

It is instructive that in December 2004, when a tsunami unexpectedly ravaged the southern Indian Ocean, India's maritime response was exemplary and little noticed. Indian ships and assets were the first to arrive in South East Asia and Sri Lanka even while providing succour nearer home. This was enabled by the close coordination between the naval apex and the highest levels of the national security apparatus.

However, this element failed in Mumbai 2008. Thus the abiding challenge for managing India's complex and wide-spectrum maritime security challenges will be to hone these institutional skills and underlying ethos before the next exigency arises so that the collective response is appropriate and effective. **DSI**