



Delhi Policy Group

Advancing India's Rise as a Leading Power



DPG POLICY BRIEF

Understanding India's Maritime Security Coordination Needs

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Cover Photographs:

An IAF Mig-29 off Bombay High. Source: Author

ICGS Sarathi and an IN helicopter work together to demonstrate SAR capability. Source: Indian Coast Guard.

Preparation for boarding a suspected vessel. Source: Indian Coast Guard

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Introduction

Media reports on July 13, 2021 spoke of the Government of India appointing a National Maritime Security Coordinator^{1,2}, with the post being tenable by a retired or serving Vice Admiral. This generated considerable debate, particularly in social media, tinged with the belief that keeping this post outside the ambit of theatre commands being considered simultaneously would weaken them. The belief was based on an inadequate understanding of the need or what the job actually entails.

The Genesis

The need for coordination amongst multiple agencies involved in security of India's maritime assets became evident with discovery of offshore oil in Bombay (now Mumbai) High in the 1970s. The war of 1971 drove home to planners that a security scheme had to be put in place for this asset. Responsibility for area air defence vested with the Air Force, while seaward protection was the responsibility of the Navy (the Coast Guard had not yet been raised). ONGC, under the Ministry of Petroleum and Natural Gas, was the third stakeholder. The scheme that was evolved included fitment of radars on selected platforms to provide warning of approaching air and surface threats, creation of a Joint Operations Centre to coordinate the response of the IN and the IAF, and the conduct of exercises involving all stakeholders. The raising of the Indian Coast Guard (ICG) with responsibility to "protect by such measures, as it thinks fit, the maritime and other national interests of India in the maritime zones of India"³ added another stakeholder along with the well-known Indian penchant for working in silos. An Offshore Defence Advisory Group, headed by a Flag Officer, was sanctioned for coordination in 1983 and began functioning in 1986. This scheme, which focused on the threat from adversary

¹ "Government may appoint National Maritime Security Coordinator to handle Issues", Business Standard, July 13, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/economy-policy/govt-may-appoint-national-maritime-security-coordinator-to-handle-issues-121071300876_1.html

² Shishir Gupta, "India to appoint National Maritime Security Coordinator for maritime security", July 13, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-to-appoint-national-maritime-security-coordinator-for-maritime-security-101626154622796.html>

³ Article 14 (1) of the Coast Guard Act, 1978.

nation states, was to continue without much change till the Mumbai bomb blasts of 1993.



An IAF Mig-29 off Bombay High. Source: Author

The blasts alerted those charged with maritime security planning that attack could also arise from subversive elements in peace and in situations short of war, with the threat emanating from the mainland. To counter this in the Offshore Development Area (ODA), the requirement for naval security clearance for all vessels operating in the ODA and patrols by naval personnel using vessels (trawlers) hired from fishermen was introduced. Separately, Op Swan was launched to provide coastal security, using naval manpower sucked out of existing sanctioned billets and hired trawlers to patrol the Gujarat and Maharashtra coasts. The solution, evolved as a temporary fix, became a long term project. The number of different agencies involved in maritime security grew sharply. Apart from central and state fishery authorities, law enforcement, domestic intelligence organisations and DG Shipping also came into the picture, as did customs and central excise. The operation may have deterred those seeking to penetrate the cordon, though the inadequacies of divided responsibilities, coordination limitations, quality of temporary duty manpower, poor equipment and motivation among the concerned agencies were evident to all those involved.

The GoM constituted after Kargil observed, "Little has been done over the years to understand or take action to create infrastructure for the protection of India's vast coastal areas"⁴. It called for the setting up of a specialised Marine Police Force in all Coastal States and island territories⁵. It recommended, "An apex body for management of maritime affairs should be formed for institutionalized linkages between the Navy, Coast Guard, and the concerned Ministries of the Central and State Governments. The MoD should take necessary action to constitute the apex body"⁶. It also said, "Naval and Coast Guard representation should be made mandatory on major Port Trusts and State Maritime Boards, Maritime State Development Councils and Studies such as the Port Vision 2020 to ensure their effective interaction with coastal regulatory bodies and port authorities"⁷.

In 2005, the IN advocated the immediate setting up of a National Maritime Commission to chalk out the country's long-term maritime policy⁸. The issue was reported to have been awaiting decision for about two years⁹. However, there was little progress.

The 2008 terror attacks in Mumbai added the new dimension of strikes by externally trained sub-state proxy actors (terrorists) to the perceived threat. The Navy took up a case for expeditious implementation of the GoM recommendation for creation of the apex body for management of maritime affairs in the aftermath of 26/11. Meanwhile, as observed by the Public Accounts Committee, "coastal patrolling by the IN on the Maharashtra coast was discontinued by September 2005, based on the decision of the Ministry of Home Affairs to establish coastal police stations to provide the coastal security and check smuggling of arms and ammunition"¹⁰. However, the Committee observed that the number of coastal police stations set up fell short of the requirement, the training and resources provided to the marine police were substandard, and large voids were left in the coastal patrolling scheme. Because of diffused responsibility, no one could be held accountable for the shortcomings. The committee also found fault with the designation of DG

⁴ Paragraph 5.50 of GoM Recommendations,
<https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf>

⁵ Paragraph 5.58, *ibid*.

⁶ Paragraph 5.72, *ibid*

⁷ Paragraph 5.73, *ibid*.

⁸ "Set up National Maritime Commission: Navy to Government", Zee News, February 15, 2005,
https://zeenews.india.com/news/nation/set-up-national-maritime-commission-navy-to-government_202094.html

⁹ *Ibid*.

¹⁰ Fifty-First Report of Public Accounts Committee (2016-17) on Role and Functioning of Indian Coast Guard,
https://eparlib.nic.in/bitstream/123456789/65683/1/16_Public_Accounts_51.pdf

(Shipping) as the Maritime Safety Administrator (connected with port security) and urged the appointment of a professional with security linkages to this job.

The Need

The number of agencies involved with maritime security has expanded manifold. At least six ministries are directly involved: Defence, Home Affairs, Shipping, Agriculture, Finance, Petroleum and Natural Gas. The Ministries of External Affairs and Law also have a role, given the provisions of UNCLOS 1982 which limit jurisdiction of states as one goes further out from land. Other stakeholders include the IN, ICG, IAF, State Police forces, the BSF, CISF, Customs and Immigration, Port Trusts, DG Shipping, DG Lighthouses and Lightships, DG Hydrocarbons and state fishery departments. Then there are intelligence agencies, economic agencies, shipping and energy operators and numerous agencies at the state level.



ICGS Sarathi and an IN helicopter work together to demonstrate SAR capability.
Source: Indian Coast Guard.

In February 2009, the Cabinet Committee on Security gave the IN the responsibility for overall maritime security for both coastal and offshore areas. The ICG was made responsible for ensuring security of the maritime zones of India (Contiguous Zone, EEZ and Continental Shelf) and given the additional responsibility of ensuring coastal security in territorial waters. Marine police forces under states were made responsible for providing security inside territorial waters (i.e. till 12 nautical miles out to sea).

Shortcomings of the current structure include an ineffective regulatory framework for the offshore region (because national jurisdiction here extends only to economic assets, the region becomes the ideal base for anti-national activity), inadequate security perimeters, surveillance and access control limitations, divided responsibilities in territorial waters, other jurisdiction issues, etc.

Clearly, the integrated ocean vision contained in SAGAR must be followed up by implementation of an integrated security approach. Unless the apex body recommended by the GoM in 2001 is created, an integrated and synergised approach will remain dependent on chance and personalities, rather than organisational structure.

Current Status

The difficulties of obtaining consensus among the various stakeholders involved had prevented progress on the recommendation made by the GoM two decades ago. A National Committee on Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security against threats from the Sea (NCSMCS), with the Cabinet Secretary as its chair, was set up in August 2009¹¹. However, the committee met infrequently and could not be effective in tackling the requirements of day to day coordination. There were reservations about a serving officer coordinating the activity of other ministries and state organisations. The proposed designation of the head (Maritime Security Adviser) came in for question¹². It was evident that political will was lacking.

On April 13, 2021, General Bipin Rawat, the Chief of Defence Staff, was reported to have said, "the organisational structure of a National Maritime Commission (NMC) has been worked out after inter-ministerial consultations. It is in the final stages now, requiring only the nod of the Cabinet Committee on Security (CCS). By the middle of this year, the NMC will become a reality"¹³.

Despite reports cited in the introductory section, however, CCS approval for an NMC and the coordinator has not yet been accorded. The reports are anticipatory.

¹¹ Rajat Pandit, "India to get apex body for maritime challenges", Times of India, April 14, 2021, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/india-to-get-apex-body-for-maritime-challenges/articleshow/82057894.cms>

¹² Uday Bhaskar, "Finally, a national maritime Sherpa", Hindustan Times, July 15, 2021, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/opinion/finally-a-national-maritime-sherpa-101626349928117.html>

¹³ Rajat Pandit, Op Cit.



Preparation for boarding a suspected vessel. Source: Indian Coast Guard

Conclusion

The prolonged delay in fulfilling a need that was articulated by the GoM in its report submitted to the Prime Minister on February 26, 2001¹⁴ and reiterated in 2005 and 2008 speaks volumes of the level of interest of the nation's political and bureaucratic hierarchies in national security matters. The actual structure of the NMC and charter of duties of the NMSC is not yet in the public domain. Remarkably, it has taken over six years after the emergence of an integrated ocean vision for an integrated maritime security apparatus to approach reality. If a decision does indeed emerge in the near future, the credit for tackling a complex problem and making difficult decisions must go to the current political leadership.

¹⁴ Group of Ministers' Report on "Reforming The National Security System", Mar 23, 2001, <https://archive.pib.gov.in/archive/releases98/lyr2001/rmay2001/23052001/r2305200110.html>



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