

Paradigm shift in Coastal Security in India

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Introduction

With the ongoing border standoff with India, there is obvious and necessary focus on the land borders with China, our adversary in the North. The land borders with China suffer from lack of clear demarcation a mischievous ploy of China to keep a degree of ambivalence that it can use as a leverage at the moment of its choosing. India unfortunately despite some 22 border meetings has not been able to get even an idea of where the border lies according to China. So one is faced with the Chinese game plan in the Himalayas to redefine the border according to its long term strategic and economic interests. It may be remembered that it is the Kargil conflict in the heights with Pakistan that compelled the Government of India to appoint a Group of Ministersⁱ who went in to all dimensions of border control both land and sea. While India has serious border issues with its neighbours, the maritime border disputes are limited to just Pakistan who shares the western land and sea borders. This paper aims to examine the challenges along the Indian coast line and in the off shore Islands of great economic and strategic importance to India a growing economy.

Genesis of the International Developments on asymmetric attacks and Sea borne threats

In October 2000 a major US war vessel USS Cole on patrol in the Gulf of Aden was rammed by an explosive laden boat by Al Qaida terrorists. The later day analysis has brought out that the modus operandi of the Al Qaida terrorist closely followed the methods of LTTE Sea tigers who were part of their suicide squads. Another French oil tanker MV Limburg was also attacked in a similar manner in the same waters (which bore the stamp of Al Qaida that was using the same methodology of the LTTE to strike both military and surface targets) two years later and the maritime world initiated many measures for countering the threat at sea.

Another French oil tanker MV Limburg was also attackedⁱⁱ in a similar manner in the same waters two years later and the maritime world initiated many measures for countering the threat at sea. The attack on the WTC happened in between these two maritime incidents. Post 9/11 there was increased awareness of the potential of sea borne terrorists. There were serious apprehensions

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about the possible use of ships and craft in the medium of the seas just as in the case of the WTC attack where commercial aircraft was used as human guided missiles to destroy the iconic symbol of USA in Washington DC. In a major conference under IMO a path breaking International Ship and Port Security (ISPS) code was implemented on 01 July 2004 which changed the rules of business in all ports around the world and also on ships which now had to prepare for unconventional attacks including piracy at sea. The increased incidence of piracy more so since 2005 along the Somali coast also made the naval forces of the world to come together to launch anti piracy missions. The fear that the pirates could turn to terrorism kept the security forces on tenterhooks.

An important observation is that while sea borne attacks in Sri Lankan waters was a new normal during the Eelam war in the late 80s, the west did not take notice of the potential of such attacks in the medium of the sea till the attack on USS Cole and MV Limburg. It is only when the WTC was attacked that the west realized the potential of terrorists to inflict such damage in all the three dimensions.

Maritime Canvas

India is blessed with an Exclusive Economic Zone of 200 nautical miles in which it has the full rights to harness the oceans for its resources. The Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) in the Indian Ocean connect the energy and trade routes of immense importance to the world. For a country subjugated by the sea routes by colonial powers, the challenge of safeguarding our maritime interests are immense. With a determined adversary in the west who uses state sponsored activities across the land and sea borders, India has implemented many measures to protect its coast and the EEZ. Some of the other security measures have also been initiated with an eye on the expanding foot prints of China which has not become a full-fledged maritime power with interests from Asia to Africa and beyond. The presence of PLA units both surface and sub-surface has been a cause of concern more so in collusion with Pakistan. While many are aware about the extent of the EEZ which is 2.01 mn square kilometers, not many are in the knowledge that the Search and Rescue Region (SRR) of India is double the EEZ. The Coast Guard is the nodal agency for Search and Rescue and it places additional demands on the resources in times of distress.

Many believe that the strengthening of the coastal security was a result of the Mumbai terror attack when on 28th November 2008, a well-trained sea borne terrorists breached out oceanic and coastal security and unleashed violence against both foreign and Indian nationals in and around the iconic symbols of Mumbai, the commercial capital of India. However, the precursor of the coastal security dates back to 1993 when a consignment of RDX was smuggled in to Maharashtra with the connivance of the police and other agencies which again led to the series blast in Mumbai claiming innocent lives and destroying property. The legal proceedings took a long process and those proved guilty were convicted. The strengthening of the west coast due to threats to our off shore assets was undertaken by launching the Op Swan which used the naval, coast guard and air force assets to provide layers of surveillance, security and response architecture. OSCC, the Off shore security coordination committee was set up with the Director General, Coast Guard at the apex to oversee and coordinate the off shore defence challenges.

It may also be remembered that while Op Swanⁱⁱⁱ was launched on the west coast, the East coast had its own share of challenges with the war for Eelam launched by the LTTE which had become a formidable sea force. The seas between Tamil Nadu in India and Sri Lankan territory under the control of the LTTE presented a different set of challenge to the Indian Navy and the Coast Guard. So it was Op Tasha^{iv} that was driving the efforts on the east coast. Tamil Nadu was the first state to set up its own coastal security apparatus and was coordinating closely with the central agencies for preventing smuggling and anti-national activities from the shore of Sri Lanka. Till the assassination of Rajiv Gandhi, the LTTE virtually had a free hand in Tamil Nadu with both political and state Government support. The fishermen from Tamil Nadu who were also sympathizers of the cause helped LTTE in their logistic requirement by smuggling those items required for the LTTE. However, with the heinous act of LTTE which killed Rajiv Gandhi, the tables were turned against the LTTE which had resorted to violent ways against those who were perceived to be against its dream of Tamil Eelam being carved out in Sri Lanka. Under Operation Tasha, the Indian Navy set up seven naval detachments^v and set up a surveillance apparatus by using hired fishing vessels and also by increased activity from the airfield in Ramanathapuram which initially was designated as Rajali 2 was later commissioned as INS Parindu^{vi} in 2012. This air station which is now fully operational also operates the UAVs of Israeli origin to carry out surveillance in the sensitive areas of Palk Bay. The Coast Guard station here in Ramnad operates ACVs which have overcome the limitations of shallow war operations.

On signing of the Indo Sri Lanka Agreement^{vii}, there was increased activity on the coast by deployment of naval and coast Guard ships in support of Indian Peace Keeping Force (IPKF) who got involved in a long war that did not belong to India. The wounded and hurt IPKF returned to India after losing nearly 1400 soldiers.

The defeat of the LTTE is in no less measure due to the combined action of the west which provided intelligence and also proscribed LTTE as a terrorist organization along with freezing of funds and greater surveillance of the activities of the cadres of LTTE who were well distributed in the west and had well-oiled machinery for raising funds and for procuring arms for the struggle. With the defeat of the LTTE, the importance of Op Tasha on the eastern coast diminished but had to be revamped to take on the new challenges of preventing poaching, Search and Rescue, and support for scientific missions. Most importantly, there was also a need to keep an eye on a new player namely China who continues to woo India's neighbours with investments and funding to encircle India and serve its own long term interests. From a coastal force, China has become a blue water navy with addition of ships, nuclear submarines aircraft and satellites to control and direct maritime operations in our neighbourhood.

The Group of Ministers who were appointed post Kargil to look in to issues of revamping the border security specifically wanted a separate Coastal Security Group to be raised and managed by the States. They had recommended for 500 crores to be earmarked for raising the CSGs and for providing them with the platforms and other logistic supports. However except for Tamil Nadu and Gujarat there was not much that was done to raise the CSG, It took the Mumbai terror attack in 2008^{viii} to accelerate the process of investing in raising a new force that would be controlled by the State . There have been mixed reports about the performance of the CSG as many of the boats were bought in a hurry without catering for the long term support of these platforms which went in to disuse. Some of the reports about the state of these boats is indicative of the apathy of the concerned agencies in some states^{ix}. In Post Mumbai terror attack, the Indian Navy has been placed at the apex^x of the maritime security and works to coordinate the efforts of the Coast Guard to ensure that oceans and the long coast lines are kept under surveillance. It is also to be noted that the Coast Guard also has been tasked with protecting the environment and has dedicated pollution control vessels for the task. In many cases, the coastal security encompasses multiple challenges and needs to be viewed holistically and not restricted to conventional threats. The CRS (Coast

Radar Stations) were also sanctioned and integrated to provide seamless coverage of the coastal areas. This received a major fillip with the commissioning of the IMAC^{xi} in Gurgaon near Delhi which collates and analyses information on all ships and craft of any description operating at sea. It is also important to note that this initiative has been well received by major navies around the world and they are partners now in information sharing. The agreement on white ships/grey ships^{xii} is another initiative that will help prevent surprises.

The coastal security challenges have become even more acute with issues of Illegal Unreported and Unregulated fishing (IUU), asymmetric threats, smuggling, human trafficking, piracy and environmental offences. In India with the long coast line and the far flung Islands on both flanks, the layers of security need to work in unison to be ahead of the threat envelopes. The further the threat is detected greater the time for preventing a surprise such as in the case of Mumbai terror attack. Also the case of MV Seaman Guard Ohio^{xiii} which was apprehended by the Coast Guard off Tuticorin brings about the danger to our coast by unlicensed vessels carrying arms and armed personnel ostensibly to support anti-piracy missions. The other incidence of shooting of Indian fishermen by Italian Marine personnel by mistaking them for pirates strained the relations between the two countries and threw up many legal questions. In the recent decision however the International court has held that there was concurrent jurisdiction in dealing with the case though it did not allow the marines to be tried in India. Likewise, in the case of Alandro Rainbow a vessel hijacked by pirates in 1999, though the combined action of the Coast Guard and the Navy^{xiv} was a success in capturing the vessel and the crew, despite the conviction of the pirates by the lower court in Mumbai, they were acquitted by the Mumbai High Court exposing the weakness in the prosecution and the interpretation of various laws which are yet to be updated. It is of interest to note that the police had to resort to booking the offenders using an old Admiralty law and even today the anti-piracy law is still to be implemented.

The layered security now starting with the CSG patrols and monitoring up to 5 nautical miles and the rest of the area being monitored by the Coast Guard and Navy is not entirely satisfactory. The CSG will need to invest in better seaworthy vessels who can at least be in a position to keep the territorial seas under observation. The close liaison with the State and Central agencies is vital to ensure that the apparatus is vibrant and proactive. The network of Coastal Radar Stations^{xv} has enabled networking of all information along the coast and in India's Islands to have a full picture

of the activities for providing quick response. India is also engaging with its Island neighbours for providing seamless information on units and movements at sea.

The Coast Guard has also been designated as the Lead Intelligence Agency vide standing committee report of 2011-12^{xvi} after the Mumbai terror attack. However, unless separate funds are allocated with dedicated personnel working in consort with customs, fisheries, state agencies, off shore exploration stake holders, ports and fishing harbours, the returns will be minimal. The Coast Guard has added considerable assets including Air Cushion Vessels and is in a position to take a lead in providing the necessary proactive intelligence to thwart any misadventure from those inimical to our national interests. It is important to note that both the Coast Guard and the Navy have been engaging with the coastal community to develop close bonds and to infuse a sense of trust in the ability of the maritime services to provide help and succor in times of distress such as natural and manmade disasters. It is only then that the fishermen can act as “eyes and ears of the maritime services.

Conclusion

The experiences of so many decades has demonstrated that there are still areas of weakness in being prepared to cover all dimensions of coastal security. A lot has been done post Kargil and Mumbai terror attack to revamp the coastal security apparatus. There are multiple agencies in the medium of the sea and effective coordination has always been a challenge as the agencies are responsible to different ministries.

The digital integration of all information at the IMAC has paved the way for enhanced maritime domain awareness (MDA). The golden rule continues to be detect the threat at extended ranges and here is where better intelligence, surveillance and information exchange are vita. From that point of view having our maritime neighbours and major countries participating in the IMAC for promoting MDA is a significant step in addressing the challenges. There is a need for greater cooperation and synergy amongst all stake holders. The shortage of surface and air assets continues to impose severe restrictions in ensuring that all the areas are kept under surveillance. While the issue of Island protection has not been discussed, that again needs to be part of the overall scheme to ensure that the entire EEZ is free of poaching and environmental issues. The often repeated

phrase that the fishermen are the eyes and ears of the fleet need to be put in to practice by gaining the confidence of the fishers who are subject to many travails at sea and in their hamlets.

That there are no serious incidents or breaches in security along the coast since 2008 has to be noted with cautious optimism. However, one cannot rest on one's laurels as the adversaries will continue to use new technology and new methods to challenge the multiple security layers and use innovative ways to breach security in vital areas and at vital points. The challenge is more accentuated when there are suicide squads as in the case of Mumbai terror attack who are trained to kill and be killed.

Notes

ⁱ See

<https://www.vifindia.org/sites/default/files/GoM%20Report%20on%20National%20Security.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Cmde RS Vasan IN (Retd), *Revisiting the attacks on USS Cole and MV Limburg*, https://www.academia.edu/3196191/Revisiting_the_attacks_on_USS_Cole_and_MV_Limburg

ⁱⁱⁱ Aashish Sharma (February 17, 2016) *Sentinels on the Coast Saga of Operation Swan* <https://salute.co.in/sentinels-on-the-coast-saga-of-operation-swan/>

^{iv} Vice Admiral GM Hiranandani (Retd) (12 Apr , 2011), *The Emerging Role of the Indian Navy in the New World Order – II*, <http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/the-emerging-role-of-the-indian-navy-in-the-new-world-order-ii/>

^v Jayanthi Pawar (04 December, 2019), *An ode to the guardian angel of the East Coast on the occasion of Navy Day*, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/cities/chennai/2019/dec/04/an-ode-to-the-guardian-angel-of-the-east-coast-on-the-occasion-of-navy-day-2071165.html>

^{vi} <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/ins-parundu>

^{vii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indo-Sri_Lanka_Accord

^{viii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2008_Mumbai_attacks

^{ix} Sumit Bhattacharjee (21 September, 2019), *Not one boat in Coastal Security Police's fleet of 18 is functional*, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/not-one-boat-in-coastal-security-polices-fleet-of-18-is-functional/article29472258.ece>

^x Vice Admiral AR Karve (29 November, 2018), *Maritime security: a decade after 26/11*, <https://www.gatewayhouse.in/maritime-security-after-2611/>

^{xi} IN Press Release (23 November, 2014), *Raksha Mantri Shri Manohar Parrikar Inaugurates IMAC, a Navy-CG Joint Operations Centre*, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/raksha-mantri-shri-manohar-parrikar-inaugurates-imac-navy-cg-joint-operations-centre>

^{xii} Rajat Pandit (12 July, 2018), *India inks pacts to secure ships beyond its seas*, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-inks-pacts-to-secure-ships-beyond-its-seas/articleshow/54830528.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst

^{xiii} https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MV_Seaman_Guard_Ohio

^{xiv} Cmde RS Vasan IN (Retd) (03 February, 2016), *Kudos to the Indian Coast Guard on its 40th Raising day*, <https://www.c3sindia.org/environment-health/kudos-to-the-indian-coast-guard-on-its-40th-raising-day-by-commodore-rs-vasan-inretd/>

^{xv} Oscar Nkala (20 March, 2015), *India Developing Network of Coastal Radars*, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2015/03/20/india-developing-network-of-coastal-radars/>

^{xvi} Rajat Pandit (12 July, 2018), *India inks pacts to secure ships beyond its seas*, https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/defence/india-inks-pacts-to-secure-ships-beyond-its-seas/articleshow/54830528.cms?utm_source=contentofinterest&utm_medium=text&utm_campaign=cppst