

Coastal Security: Time for course correction

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It's been five years since 10 terrorists from Pakistan landed on the shores of Mumbai on the night of November 26, 2008 and carried out multiple attacks in the city exposing serious shortcomings in the country's coastal security apparatus. So shocked were the mandarins in New Delhi that a day after the carnage ended, they hurriedly decided that the Indian coast guard should be responsible for guarding the entire coastline of the country. However, two months later they revised the decision and on February 9th, 2009, they roped in the Indian navy and entrusted it with the responsibility for the overall maritime security including coastal security. The Indian coast guard was given the additional responsibility of guarding the territorial waters right till the shoreline. A decision was also taken to augment the strength and presence of marine police along the coast. Thus a three tier security arrangement for coastal security was formally put in place with the Indian navy guarding the outer tier, the Indian coast guard patrolling the intermediate layer and the marine police patrolling the shallow and inland waters.

This arrangement looks perfect on paper, but it has not translated itself satisfactorily on the ground and therefore the coastal security mechanism remains weak. One of the reasons for the failure is that the three-tier structure has made it difficult to hold any organisation solely responsible in case any untoward incident takes place as every organisation has arguments in its defence. For instance, the Indian navy argues that while it has been entrusted with the overall responsibility for coastal security, it does not have the power to task all the concerned organisations or command their resources for everyday coastal security duties and therefore should not be held responsible. Similarly, the Indian coast guard argues that it has been given the responsibility only for coordinating with the concerned central and state agencies for coastal security but not made in charge of coastal security. The marine police's argument is that since the Indian navy and the Indian coast guard are guarding the outer and intermediate waters, it is their responsibility to prevent any intrusions into the coastal waters from outside and therefore should not be held accountable in case of any incident.

Furthermore, the involvement of a number of organisations in coastal security duties has proven to be counterproductive. Presently, in addition to the roles of the three organisations highlighted above, others such as the Customs Department (marine-preventive) and the Central Industrial Security Force (marine wing) have also been made part of the coastal security architecture. Since these tasks require the conduct of sea patrols in their respective areas of jurisdiction, these organisations have started procuring marine assets such as interceptor boats. The problem with such a step is while the Indian navy and the Indian coast guard possess the technical knowledge and manpower as well as infrastructure to handle these boats, the marine police, CISF and Customs department

have barely any. As a result these expensive assets are either not being used for want of technical manpower or sent away for repairs because of mishandling. Thus, national resources are getting frittered away on assets which are not giving any substantive returns.

The involvement of several organisations in coastal security has also led to coordination problems among them. The tendency of each of the concerned organisations to zealously guard its own turf, reluctance to work under or along with other organisations citing differing organisational culture and goals, and propensity to hold on to intelligence, have all prevented the coastal security arrangement from working effectively. Even though a number of measures such as the formulation of standard operating procedures, conduct of joint coastal security exercises, establishment of joint operation centres and setting up of coordination committees have been undertaken, these have not proven adequate for overcoming the strong forces of dissonance among these organisations.

Most importantly, the organisations involved in coastal security suffer from inadequate capabilities in terms of manpower, assets, presence, and mind-set. For example, the Indian navy's objectives have been to defend the coasts during war time and force projection. And over the years it has developed its force structure accordingly. As a result, today it has neither the assets nor the mind-set to undertake coastal security duties. Similarly, the marine police continue to grapple with manpower and asset shortage and their growth remains contingent upon the interest of the coastal states. Those coastal states which do not see any threat emanating from the sea have not given adequate attention to the development of the marine police, but even in those where sea-borne threat perception is high, the performance of the marine police is extremely poor. This is evident from the recent Comptroller and Auditor General's (CAG) reports, which revealed that in Gujarat, the shortfall in sea patrolling conducted by the marine police is 78 to 91 per cent, while in Kerala it is 95 per cent. Also the mind-set that the police are a land based organisation has not helped.

Given all these, it is only prudent to designate a single organisation for coastal security. The Indian coast guard is well suited for shouldering the responsibility as it has the training, tradition and the mind-set. The Indian coast guard has been functioning as the national authority for Offshore Security Coordination Committee (OSCC), national authority for maritime search and rescue, lead intelligence agency for coastal borders and the coordinating agency for coastal security. Also unlike the Indian navy, it has a strong presence along the entire coastline of the country and has established good working relationships with concerned organisations as well as with fishermen. Therefore, the Government of India should designate the Indian coast guard as the single authority responsible for coastal security. Accordingly, the charter of the ICG should be duly amended, and the force should be strengthened and trained. The Indian navy should be eased out from coastal security responsibilities, and allowed to concentrate on developing its blue water capabilities and defending the country during times of war. It appears that the kneejerk reaction of the Government following the 'Mumbai 26 attacks' to entrust coastal security responsibilities to the Indian coast guard, after all, had some merit to it.

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