India's Coastal Security in the light of recent events

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India is a country with more than 7,500 km long coastline which makes it vulnerable to multiple threats. Being one of the most populous countries in the world, India has several large cities and population centres located on both its Eastern and Western coasts along with several critical infrastructure such as ports, refineries, Special Economic Zones, Naval Bases and much more. The long coastline of India also provides us abundance resource of fisheries which make up the Blue Economy and provide livelihood to a large section of Indians in the unorganised sector. These together are an essential part of the Indian Economy and safeguarding them is the key challenge for India's Coastal Security.

The idea of coastal security has taken priority since the 26/11 attack in Mumbai that came via Maritime routes. Since then, India has started four Joint Command Centres in Mumbai, Kochi, Vishakhapatnam, and Port Blair to coordinate among various agencies which were absent before. Since 2009, there has been a three-tier security system in place to ensure coastal security with the Indian Navy, Coast Guard and Coastal Police coordinating with each other. The creation of the Marine Police Force at the state level was instrumental in increasing patrolling and surveillance along the coastline. Modi Government's SAGAR Vision is aimed at the enhancement of India's coastal and maritime security through infrastructure, sustainable development, and diplomacy.

Read Sea Crisis and India's Coastal Security

Due to its proximity to the West Asian region, India's coastal security, primarily on the Western coast holds significant importance. With the current escalation of the Israel-Palestine conflict and the crisis in the Red Sea, India is equally vulnerable to several external threats. The 2008 terror attack in Mumbai was a warning bell that India's maritime borders are equally prone to threats like its land borders. Along with conventional threats such as terrorism; smuggling of illegal substances, piracy, attacks on ships and trade routes in the vicinity. India's coastal security policy should include the security of its Territorial Waters which India has exclusive control of as well as the Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) where India can exploit the resources.

The recent Red Sea crisis has raised the significance for India to relook into Coastal Security Initiatives. The Red Sea is an important area for India's maritime interest. Given that the distance between the Gujarat coast and the Arabian Peninsula is merely 2000 km, the happenings in the region can affect India too. The regions on the coast of Maharashtra and Gujarat have always been witness to different types of smuggling. The Red Sea, the Strait of Hormuz and the Gulf of Aden hold immense importance for India. A significant amount of crude oil, natural gas and trade passes through this region. The recently signed IMEC corridor between India and the Western Countries indicates India's interest in the region.

The recent attacks on ships, both Indian and Foreign registered as well as the acts of Piracy against the Indian crew members should be a matter of concern. Houthis in Yemen have used drones and missiles to target ships in the Red Sea, many of them destined to reach Indian ports. Since then, India has been active in various Anti-Piracy operations in the Red Sea. A

week ago, an Iranian fishing vessel with an Indian crew was detained by the Indian Coast Guard offshore Beypore in Kerala raising concerns for Security forces.

Options for India

India took responsibility in responding to the situation in West Asia which is commendable in protecting its interests and for the security at the global level. Without getting into the Israel-Palestine conflict India was able to balance its stance. By not attacking Houthis and only tackling piracy, the Indian Navy's role in mitigating various incidents in the Red Sea cannot be understated. It has been at the forefront of rescue missions, countering piracy, and safeguarding India's maritime boundaries coordinating with governments around the region. When foreign vessels were attacked, the Indian Navy took the responsibility to safeguard them playing a major role at both regional and global levels. Indian Navy was quick in sending INS Kochi and INS Kolkata on anti-piracy patrol in the Gulf of Aden. The right amount of coordination between the state and central level is key to creating a balanced security approach. Coastal Security should be ensured cordially through cooperative federalism. Joint operational exercises should be conducted on a regular basis with proper coordination between the Navy, Coast Guard, Coastal Police, and Customs in the coastal areas with a special focus on island territories.

With increasing engagement with the world, India's challenges also multiply. In the context of the Red Sea crisis, working with countries of West Asia in countering the threats is required. Similarly, working closely with the USA and allies who have an elaborate presence in the region should be prioritised. Securing trade routes and countering acts of Piracy is essential in keeping threats to maritime and coastal security at a low. Working with allied partners and groupings such as QUAD and I2U2 are imminent. During S Jaishankar's recent visit to Iran, Maritime Security was the main focus of the bilateral visit. Through a mix of strategy and diplomacy, India should proceed in the right direction in ensuring its coastal and maritime security.

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