

AN INTEGRATED APPROACH TO COASTAL AND OFFSHORE DEFENCE: LEVERAGING THE COASTAL SECURITY CONSTRUCT

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Introduction

The second edition of Exercise SEA VIGIL, a two day pan-India biennial coastal defence exercise, was conducted on 12 and 13 January 2021.¹ The exercise, which is India's largest such exercise, was facilitated by central ministries and state governments, and is conducted in the build-up to the Indian Navy's theatre-level war-fighting exercise TROPEX [Theatre-level Readiness Operational Exercise].² The exercise conducted along the Indian coast, and maritime zones, exercised both peacetime and wartime contingencies.³ All coastal states, union territories, and maritime security stakeholders, including the coastal and fishing communities, participated in the exercise. The exercise this year was conducted in the backdrop of tensions with China.

The exercise saw the deployment of the entire coastal security apparatus, including 110 surface assets of the Indian Navy and Coast Guard.⁴ Considering the fact that other maritime elements of the coastal security construct—State Marine Police, Customs, Border Security Force, Central Industrial Security Force, etc.—were also deployed, the total number of surface assets deployed could have been in the 500-600 range.⁵ These numbers are significantly more than some of the largest naval exercises in the world.⁶ In addition to surface assets, air assets were also deployed; and Indian Navy Marine Commandos (MARCOs), the National Security Guard (NSG), and State Police teams were also integrated into the response-chain. The exercise, highly important in terms of national security, met all the objectives and highlighted the progress made in enhanced cooperation and coordination amongst all agencies.⁷

¹ Ministry of Defence, "Completion of Coastal Defence Exercise Sea Vigil 21," Press Information Bureau, 14 January 2021, <https://www.pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1688462>

² Ministry of Defence, "Indian Navy to Coordinate Second Edition of Largest Coastal Defence Exercise – Sea Vigil 21," Press Information Bureau, 11 January 2021, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1687660>

³ Ministry of Defence, "Completion of Coastal Defence Exercise Sea Vigil 21."

⁴ Ministry of Defence, "Completion of Coastal Defence Exercise Sea Vigil 21."

⁵ "Nigrani, Nireekshan and Nakabandi Exercise Sea Vigil - A Historic Endeavour," Indian Navy, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/nigrani-nireekshan-and-nakabandi-exercise-sea-vigil-historic-endeavour> accessed 20 January 2021.

⁶ For example, 22 ships and one submarine participated in Rim of the Pacific (RIMPAC) exercise in 2020; in the previous edition in 2018 45 ships had participated. Source: Megan Eckstien, "Scaled-Back, At-Sea RIMPAC 2020 Exercise Kicks Off Near Hawaii," USNI News, 17 August 2020, <https://news.usni.org/2020/08/17/scaled-back-at-sea-rimpac-2020-exercise-kicks-off-near-hawaii>, accessed 20 January 2021.

⁷ Ministry of Defence, "Completion of Coastal Defence Exercise Sea Vigil 21."

Spectrum of Maritime Security Exercises

The present construct for coastal security was established soon after the 2008 Mumbai attacks. Since then, a host of steps have been taken by all stakeholders to strengthen aspects related to coastal security under their respective charters, which continue to be progressively consolidated, and improved upon. More significant, amongst the steps taken, are assigning responsibilities for coastal security to maritime security agencies; capacity-building and capability-enhancement of security agencies; and a thrust on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and electronic surveillance of the coastal areas.

One of initiatives was the conduct of the biannual coastal security exercises, Exercise SAGAR KAVACH, by the Coast Guard in coastal states and union territories. The exercise is conducted either independently for a state, or is combined with an adjoining state, and includes participation by all stakeholders.⁸ The primary objective of the exercise is to assess the effectiveness of measures instituted, and in turn to strengthen the system by acting on the lessons learnt.⁹ These exercises facilitate operational training, audit of operational and information-sharing procedures, identification of voids, streamlining of Standard Operating Procedures (SOPs), etc.¹⁰ Likewise, the biannual offshore security exercise, Exercise PRASTHAN, is conducted in the Offshore Development Areas (ODA) by the Indian Navy.¹¹

The first Exercise SEA VIGIL was conducted on 22 and 23 January 2019 by the Indian Navy, in close coordination with the Coast Guard, a decade after the '26/11' incident.¹² The exercise was conducted in two phases.¹³ In the first phase, audits were undertaken by multi-agency teams to assess preparedness of fish landing centres, ports, lighthouses, etc, and in the second phase, a range of contingencies, including simulated attacks on vital assets, were exercised to assess response, coordination, and information-sharing.¹⁴ A debrief of the exercise was also conducted over teleconference simultaneously with all states, and key takeaways deliberated and disseminated for follow-up action.¹⁵

TROPEX is a theatre-level naval exercise which focuses on naval war-fighting in a large maritime theatre of operations, extending well beyond India's maritime zones.¹⁶ The exercise includes participation of the Indian Army and the Indian Air Force, and Coast Guard. The

⁸ Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas; Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, (Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy): New Delhi, 2015), 121.

⁹ Himadri Das, *Coastal Security; Policy Imperatives for India* (National Maritime Foundation: New Delhi, 2019), 107-08.

¹⁰ Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas; Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 121.

¹¹ "Offshore Security Exercise, 'Prasthan' conducted," Indian Navy, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/offshore-security-exercise-prasthan-conducted>, accessed 21 January 2021.

¹² On 26 November 2008 ('26/11') terrorists who had used the sea route to land at Mumbai undertook a series of attacks across several locations in Mumbai.

¹³ Ministry of Defence "Two-Day Coastal Defence Exercise "Sea Vigil" Concludes," Press Information Bureau, 23 January 2019, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1561201>

¹⁴ "Sea Vigil to be Exercised on 22 and 23 January," Indian Navy, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/sea-vigil-be-exercised-22-and-23-january>, accessed 16 March 2021.

¹⁵ Ministry of Defence, "Exercise SEA VIGIL," Press Information Bureau, 17 April 2020, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1570836>

¹⁶ Ministry of Defence, "Year End Review – 2019 Ministry of Defence," Press Information Bureau, 27 December 2019, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIfratmePage.aspx?PRID=1597842>

exercise consists of two phases; a joint work-up phase, which includes weapon firings, and a tactical phase.¹⁷

In 2018, the Indian Navy revamped its operational exercise plans *inter alia* to cater for a two-front war.¹⁸ The revised plan, with a focus on joint war-fighting, caters for scenarios such as terrorist attack from the sea on critical infrastructure, offshore defence, protection of trade, etc.¹⁹ Accordingly, two major exercises are being conducted: Exercise ENCORE [Eastern Naval Command Operational Readiness Exercise] and Exercise PASCHIM LEHER on the east and west coast respectively.²⁰ Coastal and offshore defence are being exercised during both the exercises.²¹ Separately, the tri-service Andaman and Nicobar Command also periodically conducts the Defence of Andaman and Nicobar Exercise (DANX), Exercise KAVACH, and Amphibious Exercises (AMPHEX).²²

Theoretical Framework: Doctrine-Concept-Strategy

The term ‘coastal’ encompasses both the landward and seaward dimensions, and consequently the defence or security of the coast inherently encompasses activities both at sea and ashore, working in close coordination with each other. Coastal and offshore defence, in a conflict with another nation, requires preventing and countering seaborne attacks against coastal and offshore installations.²³ Multi-dimensional attacks could be launched from ships, aircraft, or submarines using stand-off weapons, or could also be undertaken by marines and Special Forces.²⁴ Mines could also be offensively deployed off ports and harbours. Therefore, defence of coastal and offshore assets involves both offensive and defensive tasks, including coastal battery launched missile attacks, Air Defence (AD), Naval Cooperation and Guidance to Shipping (NCAGS), Mine Counter Measures (MCM), and preventing infiltration from the sea, etc.

In peacetime, coastal security largely focuses on preventing infiltration by terrorists using the sea route, and given the extent of India’s coastline and many islands, entails a wide remit of activities. While the operational end of such activities includes surveillance and patrol by ships, aircraft, and shore-based surveillance using electronic means, other related activities include security of ports

¹⁷ “Indian Navy Concludes Theatre Level Readiness and Operational Exercise (TROPEX 2017),” Indian Navy, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/indian-navy-concludes-theatre-level-readiness-and-operational-exercise-tropex-2017>, accessed 20 January 2021.

¹⁸ Ministry of Defence, “Indian Navy concludes two month Long War Game,” Press Information Bureau, 05 March 2018, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1522534>

¹⁹ Ministry of Defence, “Indian Navy concludes two month Long War Game.”

²⁰ Ministry of Defence, “Indian Navy concludes two month Long War Game.”

²¹ Ministry of Defence, “Western Naval Command Concludes Exercise XPL-18,” Press Information Bureau, 01 March 2018, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleasePage.aspx?PRID=1522260>; Ministry of Defence, “Indian Navy conducts Joint Exercise with Army and Air Force,” 25 January 2021, Press Information Bureau, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1692108>, accessed 16 March 2021.

²² “Defence of Andaman & Nicobar Islands Exercise (DANX-17),” Indian Navy, <https://www.indiannavy.nic.in/content/defence-andaman-nicobar-islands-exercise-danx-17>, accessed 22 January 2021; Ministry of Defence, “Indian Navy Conducts Joint Exercise with Army and Air Force,” Press Information Bureau, 25 Jan 21, <https://pib.gov.in/PressReleaseIframePage.aspx?PRID=1692108>

²³ Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), Indian Maritime Doctrine (Integrated Headquarter of Ministry of Defence (Navy): New Delhi, 2015), 97.

²⁴ Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas; Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 162.

and islands, protection of Vital Areas (VAs)/ Vital Points (VPs), regulation and monitoring of maritime activities, such as shipping and fishing, etc.

The concepts of defence and security are not mutually exclusive, but are interrelated and mutually supportive.²⁵ With the increasing blurring of lines between traditional and non-traditional threats, the threat spectrum has become more complex. Accordingly, the response mechanisms have also blurred with the existing responses catering for both types of threats. Specifically, with regard to coastal/ offshore security and defence, while the overall concept of defence incorporates a wider threat spectrum, and also some specialised activities, the underlying capabilities for coastal security which focus on infiltration prevention through the sea routes and regulation of maritime activities are integral to the concept of ‘coastal defence.’ Notably, *Ensuring Secure Seas: Indian Maritime Security Strategy* (IMSS 2015) highlights that “an effective organisation for coastal security also facilitates coastal defence.”²⁶

While the primary role of the Indian Navy is its military or war-fighting role, one of the missions of the Coast Guard is to “back-up the Navy during war.”²⁷ Likewise, in a land-based context border guarding forces such as the Border Security Force (BSF) have both peacetime and wartime tasks in guarding the borders.²⁸ The police of border states, such as the Punjab Police, also act as a ‘layer of defence.’²⁹ Overall, the armed forces and police organisations have their respective roles to play across the conflict spectrum in a mutually supportive and coordinated manner.

The entire spectrum of exercises in a security context can include single sector, or unidimensional exercises, such as those undertaken in ports; multi-disciplinary exercises, such as coastal/ offshore exercises, communication exercises; virtual or simulated exercises; table-top exercises; and, information sessions/ seminars.³⁰ Each exercise has its own specific aims and objectives. For example, a national-level exercise, in contrast to a state-level exercise, facilitates apex-level coordination and assessment across all states. In addition to exercises, drills also contribute towards strengthening security preparedness.³¹

²⁵ Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas; Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 163.

²⁶ Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas; Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 109.

²⁷ ‘Mission,’ Indian Coast Guard, https://www.indiancoastguard.gov.in/content/248_3_Mission.aspx, accessed 21 January 2021.

²⁸ ‘Role of the BSF,’ Border Security Force, <https://bsf.gov.in/Role?LangId=dHJ1ZQ==>, accessed 21 January 2021.

²⁹ Aseem Bassi, “Punjab Police boost second line of defence along Indo-Pak border,” *The Hindustan Times*, 23 July 2017, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/punjab/punjab-police-boost-second-line-of-defence-along-indo-pak-border/story-CS2pSsITk12wDGYuLxyWqL.html>.

³⁰ Port of Antwerp, *European Handbook of Maritime Security Exercises and Drills*, 22-24, <https://www.portofrotterdam.com/sites/default/files/European-Handbook-of-Maritime-Security-Exercises-and-Drills.pdf?token=1PCul7VO>, accessed 21 January 2021.

³¹ *Exercise*: A military manoeuvre or simulated wartime operation involving planning, preparation, and execution that is carried out for the purposes of training and evaluation [US DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms (June 2020)]; *Drill*: A small, coordinated practice to test a procedure or function [Adapted from *Exercitium: European Handbook of Maritime Security Exercises and Drills*: <https://www.portofrotterdam.com/sites/default/files/European-Handbook-of-Maritime-Security-Exercises-and-Drills.pdf?token=1PCul7VO>]

IMSS 2015 states that “joint coastal security exercises will be progressed as a central means of enhancing preparedness and coordinated operational response, amongst the multiple agencies.”³² Progressively, a robust framework of periodic exercises has indeed been developed. These exercises now vary in scale (state, zonal, and national levels) and scope (security or defence exercises). Conduct of the maiden Exercise SEA VIGIL in 2019 was a practical manifestation of the strategy which not only highlighted the importance of exercises, but also the inextricable linkages between security and defence.

Imperatives

In India’s federal structure, the responsibilities of coastal security are shared between the Centre and States.³³ However, defence of India, including preparation for defence, is an item in the Union List. At the centre, specific responsibilities are shared across ministries, offices, and agencies. Over time coordinating mechanisms for coastal security have been established across administrative levels from the district to the national level. Considering limited resources, leveraging existing mechanisms is key to effectively and efficiently strengthening the defence effort along the coast and in the offshore areas.

The coastal security construct established post the Mumbai attacks in 2008, focused mainly on preventing terrorist infiltration through the sea route, was a paradigm shift in the management of coastal (and maritime) security in India. Since then, the interagency interaction has facilitated improved coordination across a spectrum of activities which are not limited to coastal security, and this has resulted in the strengthening of defence of the coastal and offshore areas as well. The integration of the community has been another important facet of the revamped construct. The coordinated deployment of few hundred ships and craft close-coast, along with the community participation, not only facilitates efficient utilisation of available resources, but also provides greater room for the Indian Navy and Coast Guard to deploy resources for other conflict and conflict-related support tasks.

In due course, by putting in all available resources together, a 1000 asset strong maritime capacity may also be achieved in India.³⁴ Therefore, for strengthening coastal defence, operational inter-agency linkages and community-engagements need to be continually strengthened.

³² Integrated Headquarters of Ministry of Defence (Navy), *Ensuring Secure Seas; Indian Maritime Security Strategy*, 121.

³³ The spectrum of coastal security encompasses the Union List (defence, navy, armed forces of the Union, shipping, major ports, national waterways, fisheries beyond territorial waters, etc.), State List (public order, police, inland waterways, fisheries, etc.), and the Concurrent List (non-major ports, forests, criminal law and procedures, etc.)

³⁴ A "Thousand-ship Navy" (TSN) was a novel concept; defined by the erstwhile US Navy's Chief of Naval Operations (CNO) Adm. Mike Mullen in 2006 as "a global maritime partnership that unites maritime forces, port operators, commercial shippers, and international, governmental and nongovernmental agencies to address mutual concerns." Source: Gurpreet Khurana, "Thousand-Ship Navy": A Reincarnation of the Controversial P.S.I.?" Institute of Defence Studies and Analyses, https://idsa.in/idsastrategiccomments/AREincarnationoftheControversialPSI_GSKhurana_281206, accessed 16 March 2021.

Presently, the lowest level at which exercises conducted is at the state-level. Other exercises include; firstly, combined exercises between adjoining states; secondly, major exercises across multiple states within a seaboard; thirdly, a national-level exercise, which is held across the entire Indian coastline; and fourthly, a theatre-level exercise, which is held across a wide maritime theatre. As the district administration is the first responder in any crisis focused exercises/drills at the district level, conducted under the aegis of the District Coastal Security Committees, could be introduced to complement existing exercise efforts.

In addition to these exercises, focused drills in sectors, such as ports, and offshore sector, cater for 'point security.' These include periodic drills and exercises in International Ship and Port Security (ISPS) Code compliant ports, and security drills in the offshore sector.³⁵ It is likely that other Vital Areas (VAs)/ Vital Points (VPs) along the coast also follow a similar pattern of audits, drills, and exercises. Such measures, based on vulnerability-threat assessments at local levels, are considered necessary for the protection of critical maritime infrastructure, and other important coastal assets such as iconic structures, important industries, non-major ports, fishing harbours, tourist spots, etc.

The monsoon period which is not conducive for small boat operations precludes the conduct of any large-scale exercise at sea. The monsoon period could therefore be used for the conduct of other forms of exercises such as table-top exercise, simulated exercises, or communication exercises. A normal gradation would normally need to include a table-top exercise, communication exercises, simulated exercises, and finally an operational exercise. Simulated exercises in particular are an effective alternative to real exercises. An annual calendar, harmonising and integrating different forms of exercises would facilitate an optimised approach.

At a larger level, operational exercises, whether conducted at the state or the national level need to consider integrating with broader crisis management institutions within the state and the centre to deal with special situations that may arise. Such situations, could require wider coordination, or augmentation of local resources, like deployment of special forces or disaster management forces

Conclusion

The concepts of security and defence are not mutually exclusive, and particularly in the context of coastal and offshore security and defence, there are significant overlaps. The underlying measures to prevent infiltration from the sea during peace are not very different from the measures that need to be taken in conflict. Consequently, robust coastal security engenders robust coastal defence. Defence forces, central forces, and police organisations have roles to perform across the spectrum of conflict.

³⁵ Port of Antwerp, *European Handbook of Maritime Security Exercises And Drills*, 6; Oil and Natural Gas Commission, *Sustainability Report FY'19*, 5, https://www.ongcindia.com/wps/wcm/connect/99f8d113-e7b5-4457-9813-fbea0039efd5/sustain2030201.pdf?MOD=AJPERES&CONVERT_TO=url&CACHEID=ROOTWORKSPACE-99f8d113-e7b5-4457-9813-fbea0039efd5-n3TC.zS, accessed 22 January 2021.

The coastal security construct established after the Mumbai attacks involving all stakeholders marked a paradigm shift in the management of maritime and coastal security in India. One of the important initiatives has been the conduct of biannual coastal and offshore security exercises, and more lately biannual coastal defence exercises. The scale of these exercises varies from the state to the national level. Each of these exercises has a specific aim and work complementarily to achieve larger maritime security objectives. These are also complemented by sectoral exercises and drills, such as in port and the offshore sectors. The conduct of the exercises, over time, have been reviewed to ensure relevance and contemporaneousness with the threat environment.

The benefits from such regular exercises are immense. However, these exercises could be complemented by drills across the maritime security sector, and with exercises encompassing a smaller maritime front in some cases, such as in a district. Further, the overall schedule could consider a mix of various kinds of exercises and engagements amongst the agencies to preclude a sense of monotony with a singular type of engagement. Operational exercises also need to engage with crisis management institutions, to the maximum possible extent.

The revamped coastal security construct has bolstered India's coastal defence capabilities. However, it should be remembered that coastal defence is a wider concept. Induction of Mine Counter Measure Vessels (MCMVs), possibly on lease as an *ad hoc* measure, and acquisition of Next Generation Maritime Mobile Coastal Battery (NGMMCB) are also needed to strengthen the nation's coastal defences.³⁶ The proposed integrated tri-service Maritime Theatre Command (MTC), which is envisaged to include Coast Guard assets, would also bring in greater synergy and optimal resource utilisation, including for coastal and offshore security and defence.

³⁶ "Defence Minister chairs first DAC meeting, clears first BRAHMOS mobile coastal battery for Navy," BrahMos Aerospace, <http://www.brahmos.com/newscenter.php?newsid=216>, accessed 21 January 2021; Snehash Alex Philip, "Navy could take minesweeper vessels & helicopters on lease, pushes for third aircraft carrier," *The Print*, <https://theprint.in/defence/navy-could-take-minesweeper-vessels-helicopters-on-lease-pushes-for-third-aircraft-carrier/556788/>, accessed 21 January 2021.

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