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# SECURING INDIA'S MARITIME PERIPHERY: COASTAL CHALLENGES VIS-A-VIS BANGLADESH AND SRI LANKA BY ADG KR NAUTIYAL, PTM, TM, PHD (RETD)

ORGANISED BY CENJOWS  
04 JUN 2026

**SECURING INDIA'S MARITIME PERIPHERY: COASTAL CHALLENGES VIS-À-VIS BANGLADESH AND SRI LANKA**

**BY ADG KR NAUTIYAL, PTM, TM, PhD (RETD)**

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**Executive Summary**

In this lecture delivered under the Centre for Joint Warfare Studies' Thursday Lecture Series, ADG Nautiyal offered a comprehensive examination of India's coastal security architecture and the specific maritime challenges posed by developments in Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. Drawing on nearly four decades of operational experience with the Indian Coast Guard, he traced the evolution of India's maritime security framework from the 1993 Bombay serial blasts through the landmark post-2008 Mumbai attacks overhaul and projected forward into the emerging threat landscape of unmanned underwater vehicles, blue economy vulnerabilities, and climate-induced maritime disruption.

The lecture covered six major thematic areas: the layered coastal security architecture; maritime domain awareness and surveillance infrastructure; bilateral maritime security dynamics with Bangladesh and Sri Lanka; emerging and hybrid threats at sea; India's strategic posture in countering China's assertive maritime expansion; and institutional coordination gaps, including the case for a National Maritime Commission. The session concluded with a substantive interactive Q&A segment.

**Key Themes and Substantive Content**

**• Evolution of India's Coastal Security Architecture**

ADG Nautiyal situated India's coastal security evolution across three catalytic moments: the 1993 Bombay serial blasts, the 1999 Kargil War, and the 2008 Mumbai terrorist attacks. He noted that Indian strategic thinking post-independence was predominantly continental, with maritime frontiers receiving limited institutional attention.

The 1993 blasts, in which explosives were transported by sea along the Raigad coast, prompted the creation of a three-tier coastal patrol system comprising customs

(innermost layer), the Coast Guard (middle layer), and the Navy (outer layer), initially focused on Maharashtra and Tamil Nadu. Kargil exposed intelligence gaps and led to institutional reforms, including faster intelligence dissemination to operational personnel. The 2008 Mumbai attacks were the most transformative catalyst: they triggered a complete overhaul of the coastal security framework, the creation of a separate Department of Border Management, and a 233% increase in Coast Guard assets.

A national committee headed by the Cabinet Secretary was established, bringing together all secretaries to the Government of India, the Navy, the Coast Guard, and Chief Secretaries of coastal states to resolve inter-agency issues at the highest level.

#### • **Maritime Domain Awareness and Surveillance Infrastructure**

The speaker detailed the substantial expansion of India's Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities. The coastal radar chain grew from 48 static sensors to 88 radars, integrated with GPS, satellite data, and VTMS (Vessel Traffic Management System) radars to produce a real-time maritime picture accessible from both coastal headquarters and New Delhi.

Key capabilities highlighted included real-time tracking of over 10,000 vessels within India's Exclusive Economic Zone at any given time; integration through the Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR); participation in the Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness (IPMDA) under the Quad framework; bilateral and multilateral intelligence-sharing arrangements with ASEAN and Indian Ocean littoral states; and biannual joint exercises involving the Coast Guard, Navy, BSF (in creek areas), coastal police, customs, port authorities, and offshore installation operators such as ONGC.

He noted that India's maritime area of responsibility encompasses 11,098 km of mainland and island coastline, 1,382 islands, an EEZ of 2.37 million square kilometres, and a surveillance-extended zone reaching up to 200 nautical miles.

#### • **Bangladesh: Post-August 2024 Security Dynamics**

ADG Nautiyal described Bangladesh as a longstanding maritime security partner but underscored the significant disruption caused by the political rupture of August 2024. The leadership change in Dhaka led to a deterioration in intelligence-sharing

arrangements and a reduction in joint maritime patrols, creating exploitable gaps along the maritime boundary.

Of particular concern was the increased operational space for the Jamaat-ul-Mujahideen Bangladesh (JMB), which maintains linkages with Pakistan's ISI. The speaker highlighted the complex legacy of Bengal's partition and the 10,000-km creek network along the Sundarbans, which remains one of India's most challenging maritime border segments. Issues of cross-boundary fishing intrusions, illegal migration (including the Rohingya transit problem), and contraband movement were flagged as persistent concerns.

Nautiyal expressed cautious optimism that dialogue would resume, noting that both countries share fundamental economic and security interests and that better sense would prevail in due course.

#### • **Sri Lanka: Fisheries Disputes and Strategic Hedging**

The lecture examined the maritime boundary arrangements with Sri Lanka, anchored in the 1974 agreement on the southern Gulf of Mannar and the 1976 agreement covering Palk Bay, which assigned Katchatheevu Island to Sri Lanka while granting Indian fishermen visiting rights for net-drying and worship. However, longstanding tensions persist over fishing practices, particularly bottom trawling by Indian boats, which Sri Lanka phased out in 2017 but India has been slower to abandon.

On the strategic dimension, he noted China's deepening maritime footprint in Sri Lanka through debt-leveraged port infrastructure at Hambantota and Colombo and regular visits by Chinese naval vessels and submarines. Despite this, Nautiyal assessed that India has managed the relationship with Sri Lanka relatively well, having established radar stations on the island, conducting regular joint exercises, and fostering coast guard-to-coast guard interoperability and intelligence sharing.

#### • **Emerging and Hybrid Maritime Threats**

ADG Nautiyal devoted considerable attention to the shifting threat matrix, identifying the following priority concerns:

- Unmanned Underwater Vehicles (UUVs): Described as the most serious near-future threat, UUVs can be deployed from vessels over 100 nautical miles away to collect acoustic and structural signatures of ships inside foreign ports,

enabling pre-positioned explosive attacks without warning. The speaker stressed that counter-UUV technology is a critical DRDO and scientific challenge.

- **Narcotics and Arms Smuggling:** Over the past five years, the Coast Guard has seized approximately 2,549 kg of narcotics (equivalent to approximately ₹9,952 crore in street value) and interdicted 412 contraband vessels carrying primarily gold and narcotics. 90 foreign fishing vessels and 707 crew members have been apprehended, predominantly from Pakistan, Sri Lanka, and Bangladesh.
- **China's Grey Zone Operations:** The speaker characterised China's maritime behaviour as systematically exploiting the legal space between peacetime law enforcement and armed conflict, using grey zone tactics that violate UNCLOS and the nine-dash line construct to coerce regional states.
- **Blue Economy Expansion:** By 2047, India plans to bring 95% of its EEZ under active exploration and production, radically expanding the maritime asset footprint requiring protection.
- **Climate and Environmental Factors:** Rising sea levels are eroding low-lying islands (as observed during the 2004 tsunami, when the speaker was commanding a vessel in the area), warming oceans are shifting fish stocks into contested waters, and the Sundarbans coastline faces progressive inundation.
- **Undersea Cable Vulnerability:** India's submarine cable network carries 95% of internet traffic and financial transactions, making it one of the most exposed strategic assets in the maritime domain.

#### • **India's Strategic Posture and Regional Partnerships**

On India's broader strategic posture, Nautiyal pointed to the Quad as the most significant multilateral mechanism for managing China's maritime assertiveness while underscoring bilateral naval engagements with Vietnam, the Philippines, Japan, Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore. He noted India's regular naval presence in the South China Sea and ongoing joint exercises as expressions of commitment to a rules-based order.

On the SAGAR (Security and Growth for All in the Region) and MAHASAGAR doctrines, he explained that the shift from 'in the region' to 'across the region' signals India's expanding maritime ambition. In contrast to China's debt-trap approach, India's

capacity-building assistance to neighbours, including the provision of patrol vessels to Sri Lanka, Bangladesh, the Maldives, and Mauritius, reflects a non-coercive model of regional maritime partnership.

Regarding India's consistent policy of non-intervention and peaceful resolution, whether in the Red Sea crisis, the Ukraine conflict, or the Israel-Iran confrontation, Nautiyal reaffirmed India's image as a credible and neutral actor in international maritime affairs, avoiding the leverage-seeking behaviour of major powers.

### **Key Takeaways for Policy and Research**

- India's coastal security architecture, while substantially improved since 2008, retains identifiable vulnerabilities in the fisheries sector and at unmarked coastal landing points that merit continued policy attention.
- The August 2024 political rupture with Bangladesh represents the most significant operational setback to India's Bay of Bengal security posture in recent years and warrants dedicated diplomatic and intelligence re-engagement.
- Unmanned Underwater Vehicles constitute an asymmetric threat for which India's current sensor and interception capabilities are insufficiently developed. Counter-UUV research at DRDO and allied institutions should be treated as an urgent priority.
- The Great Nicobar Island Development Project is strategically sound and analytically defensible; concerns regarding environmental compliance and tribal rehabilitation should be managed within international norms rather than used to delay the project.
- India's transition from SAGAR to MAHASAGAR reflects a deliberate expansion of strategic maritime ambition. The Quad and bilateral coast guard partnerships in the Indo-Pacific are the primary instruments for operationalising this expanded posture.
- The case for a National Maritime Commission is strong. Institutional coordination across central and state agencies remains the systemic weak point in India's otherwise considerably strengthened coastal security framework.