

# CENTRE FOR JOINT WARFARE STUDIES



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## IT IS TIME WE RAISED OUR OWN MARITIME MILITIA



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### **Existing Coastal Security Architecture.**

Post 26/11, a revamp of the coastal security architecture has moved centrestage. Several initiatives have been taken over the last decade at the structural level as well as with regard to enhancement of capabilities. Insofar as structure is concerned, respective C's-in-C have been given the additional responsibility of Coastal Security within their Areas of Responsibility (AOR) while the Director General Coast Guard (DGCG) has been designated as the Commander Coastal Defence. Joint Operations Centres (JOCs) have been set up to strengthen the multi-agency process at the execution level with requisite intelligence inputs being provided by the New Delhi based Multi

Agency Centre (MAC) complemented by the State Multi Agency Centres (SMACs). In addition, considerable assets have been acquired by the Navy, Coast Guard and State Maritime Police Forces. Apart from waterborne craft, these include a variety of technical assets such as a coastal Automatic Identification System (AIS) chain and coastal radar chain amongst others. Data captured by these assets is transmitted through a dedicated National Command, Control, Communication and Intelligence (NC3I) network to the Integrated Multi Agency Centre (IMAC) at Gurgaon for fusion and visualization. This fused picture is thereafter made available to authorised users using the same network.



**Deficiencies.** While technical means are well suited for cooperative vessels which are required to have AIS or Long Range Identification and Tracking (LRIT) transponders fitted on board in accordance with IMO regulations; identification of small craft (less than 20m in length) and uncooperative ones (with installed transponders that are either switched off or are masquerading as a different vessel) still poses problems. Here too technical solutions are being pursued such as the roll out of active mini AIS transponders or passive Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) systems to ease the problem of identification. The enormity of this task can be gauged by the fact that we have nearly 2,00,000 fishing boats of various shapes and sizes that routinely ply our waters<sup>i</sup>. Further, identification by itself is not foolproof as was clearly brought out in the 26/11 incident where an Indian fishing boat was commandeered and used for ferrying terrorists along with all their gear to Mumbai. To add to the complexity, we have an enormous number of landing points along our coast which, are used by waterborne craft of all types. Monitoring each of these is a herculean task.

**Leveraging the Fishing Community.** There is there fore no substitute for timely and actionable intelligence. While there are many sources that need to be tapped for obtaining such information, the largest and arguably the most underutilised is our colossal fishing community. They are the ones who are at sea every day and are intimately familiar with our coastal waters and with those who ply on it, our maritime 'eyes and ears' in every sense. Several steps have already been taken to integrate fishermen in the coastal security architecture by issuing them with biometric identification

cards and encouraging them to report all untoward incidents. These measures are reinforced from time to time through the conduct of camps and security exercises. While the maritime security agencies may be given some credit for the positive impact of this outreach programme, much more needs to be done.

**Existing Models.** There are fundamental limitations to what can be achieved through persuading the fishing community to cooperate with the security agencies. An alternate approach could be to formally induct this community into our coastal security architecture. Are there any such models available in other countries for us to emulate? We don't have to look too far for doing so. There is a ready-made model in China's third maritime force (over and above the PLA Navy and China Coast Guard), that being the Chinese Maritime Militia. What is the essential nature of this force? As per literature available, it essentially comprises of people recruited from the fishing community. Post induction, they are given basic training on communications, small arms handling, navigation and possibly ship and aircraft recognition. Such capsules are typically undertaken for six to eight weeks in a year during which personnel are eligible for a salary. On completion, the militia go back to their profession of fishing using their own vessels. Militia units may vary widely from one location to another, as the composition of each one is based on local conditions<sup>ii</sup>.

**Tasking of the Chinese Maritime Militia.** The tasking handed out by the shore authorities to the militia comprises the gathering of intelligence, protecting sovereignty (by interfering with vessels engaged in Freedom of Navigation (FoN)

patrols) regulating fishing and executing emergency rescue services. Suitable compensations are given to vessel owners and crew for time spent in the execution of such tasks so as to preclude any financial loss in doing so. Ashore, the Maritime Militia involves a skeletal organisation manned by trained personnel on a permanent basis. Their primary job is to remain netted-in with the fishing boats and to facilitate the flow of instructions and reports. The only estimate of the size of the Maritime Militia is from a source published in 1978, which puts the number of personnel at 750,000 on approximately 140,000 craft,<sup>iii</sup> though it is quite possible that as with the PLA, the number may be smaller today.

**Replicating the Chinese Model.** Is it possible for us to replicate such a model and create our own Maritime Militia? How would such a force be raised and administered? We are fortunate in having an existing organisation that could be leveraged to take on this role, that being the Territorial Army (TA). The TA runs on the sons of the soil concept, which is ideally suited for incorporating the fishing community into its fold. The Maritime Militia would require the setting up of a limited number of maritime TA battalions, possibly one for each coastal state. The battalions would be charged with the responsibility of recruiting, training, administering and tasking fisherman for enhancing coastal security. So as to ensure seamless incorporation in the existing coastal security architecture, they could be brought under the charge of the Coast Guard, reporting to the concerned Regional Head Quarters (RHQs).

**Potential Benefits.** The benefits of adopting such an approach would be manifold. These could be listed as follows: -

➤ **Optimization of Training.** The biggest impediment for the creation of a maritime force is training its members in the art of sea-faring. Other requirements such as the handling of small arms, usage of radio sets, etc. are much easier skill-sets to imbibe. Fishermen are born seafarers; and it is much easier to train a seaman for policing duties than train policemen for becoming seamen. We would thus be taking advantage of existing skills and optimizing our training requirement.

➤ **Local Knowledge.** Intelligence in the field is primarily based on local domain knowledge and networking. The fishing community is invariably the first to notice aberrations from the norm at sea; be it the unusual presence of vessels from outside the region, unexplained changes in fishing patterns, unscheduled landings by boats and similar occurrences. Being well networked, such incidents could easily be cross referenced with one another thereby raising the quality of reports and reducing the probability of false alarms.

➤ **Accountability.** Induction of the local fishing populace into TA battalions will give them a sense of purpose and belonging. It would inculcate a strong sense of nationalism, which is the hallmark of any uniformed force. No longer would we have to appeal to or persuade fishermen to contribute towards coastal security. It would now be their solemn duty to do so failing which they would be held accountable.



➤ **Multiplier Effect.** The biggest advantage of the TA is the multiplier effect that its structure allows. Enrolled personnel are typically required to be embodied for two months in a year for training. They are entitled to a salary only for this period. In effect, a maritime battalion comprising about 1000 personnel can rotate through five to six thousand members of the fishing community, in two-monthly iterations. The net outflow of funding for the quantum of people being trained is small. For the disembodied personnel, there is a spill-over effect in terms of tasking. They will not cease to be your eyes and ears the moment their training period is over. Provisioning of fishing craft could be so structured that they continue to hold communication and navigation gear provided to them when embodied with a clear understanding that reporting is to

continue and time lost in undertaking emergent tasks would be suitably compensated.

**Conclusion.** It may thus be seen that incorporating the fishing community into our Coastal Security architecture would be immensely beneficial for addressing the large gaps that persist even today. It would be extremely cost effective as we would essentially be leveraging a skill set that already exists within the country. To offset whatever be the small financial implications of doing so, we could consider disbanding the maritime police and transferring their assets to the Coast Guard thereby reducing the number of organisations charged with the responsibility of coastal security. Inducting members of the fishing community into the TA has the potential to organise them into a well-knit force akin to that in China. It is high time we considered creating our own Maritime Militia.

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- <sup>i</sup> International Collective in Support of Fishworkers – Indian Fisheries, Fisheries and Fishing Communities in India, <https://indianfisheries.icsf.net/>, accessed on 22 Jul 2018.
- <sup>ii</sup> Andrew S. Erickson and Conor M. Kennedy, “China’s Maritime Militia,” Center for Naval Analysis, [https://www.cna.org/cna\\_files/pdf/chinas-maritime-militia.pdf](https://www.cna.org/cna_files/pdf/chinas-maritime-militia.pdf), accessed on 22 Jul 2018.
- <sup>iii</sup> Stephen Uhalley, “China in the Pacific,” *Oceans* (May 1978), p. 33.

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