

MARITIME SECURITY

Safeguarding Seafarers, Securing Seas: How India Responds to Maritime Threats

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In the vast, shadowed silence of international waters, far beyond the coastlines that define nations, Indian seafarers face not only storms of weather but also the turbulence of piracy, geopolitical conflict, and unpredictable aggression. In this high-stakes maritime environment, the safety of Indian seafarers is both a national resolve and a global responsibility.

What most people never see is what happens behind the curtains, the coordination, the crisis response, and the diplomacy required to bring our seafarers back home safely. The Maritime Security Branch leads India's efforts from the Directorate General of Shipping, coordinating inter-ministerial actions and international engagement to ensure that no Indian life is left unprotected at sea. At the heart of this security architecture lies a coordinated surveillance and response network: the Directorate's Mercantile Marine Domain Awareness Centre - DGComm Centre work in close synergy with the Indian Navy's Information Fusion Centre - Indian Ocean Region and the Indian Coast Guard's Maritime Rescue Coordination Centre. This triad forms India's maritime nerve centre, receiving intelligence, monitoring vessels, coordinating efforts and triggering real-time responses to secure and protect Indian lives.

In his message in the Directorate's Maritime Security Review 2024, published in July 2025, Shyam Jagannathan, Director General of Shipping, captured the spirit of



India's maritime security efforts with clarity and conviction: "Security at sea is not built on ships alone, but on systems, coordination, and conviction." Capt. S I Abul Kalam Azad, Nautical Advisor to the Government of India, reinforced this perspective by emphasising that "Maritime Security is not solely about protecting vessels, but fundamentally about upholding sovereignty, ensuring resilience, and securing survival at sea".

These observations are not abstract principles but are demonstrated in the Directorate's real-world response to crises. When piracy incidents erupt in regions such as the Gulf of Guinea or off the Somali coast, these guiding principles are reflected in the Directorate's decisive action. The operational and diplomatic challenges in such situations are immense. Shipowners may lack kidnap and ransom insurance or formal crisis management plans, resulting in unstructured and vulnerable negotiations. In such circumstances, the Directorate, in coordination with India's diplomatic

“INDIA'S MESSAGE IS CLEAR. WHEREVER THE INDIAN SEAFARER SAILS, THE NATION SAILS WITH THEM

missions, inter-ministerial agencies, and international partners, mobilises every available resource. Diplomatic channels, naval coordination, and operational support are activated in a tightly orchestrated response. These operations are never textbook rescues. They demand real-time decision making, often a race against both time and bureaucracy, where each step can determine the safety of Indian crew members. Through such coordinated efforts, numerous Indian seafarers have been rescued and repatriated from some of the world's most hostile maritime environments. Each successful rescue is a living testament to the systems,

coordination, and conviction that underpin India's maritime security commitment.

Whether it is a hijacking alert in the Gulf of Aden, a fire following a drone strike in the Red Sea, or a critical rescue operation, the machinery moves swiftly, linking navies, coast guards, countries, non-governmental organisations, and stakeholders to protect those onboard. In 2024, India responded to several alarming maritime incidents amid escalating geopolitical tensions affecting shipping worldwide. Indian seafarers were safeguarded through prompt action, and India's mechanisms were praised internationally for assisting foreign nationals on foreign flagged ships. The hijacking of MV Ruen with no Indian crew was resolved after a 40-hour operation by Indian Marine Commandos, while the inferno on MT Marlin Luanda was extinguished by her Indian crew with naval support. Their exceptional courage earned Master & Crew of MT Marlin Luanda a prestigious IMO Bravery Award and the Indian Navy the IMO citation, bringing honour to the Indian maritime fraternity. These were not just crises but tests of courage, response, and responsibility.

India's strategy is not reactive but deeply institutionalised. Standard Operating Procedures are mandated for Indian flagged vessels and Indian seafarers in high-risk zones. Directorate's has also issued executive orders from time to time which has further enhanced onboard reporting, overall vigilance and mandatory crew training, therefore reinforcing maritime security through preparedness and resilience.

India's message is clear. Wherever the Indian seafarer sails, the nation sails with them.

MMD KOLKATA

The Backbone of Maritime Regulation in Eastern India

Vikrant Rai
 Principal Officer, MMD Kolkata, DGS

The Mercantile Marine Department (MMD), Kolkata, has stood as one of the oldest maritime institutions in the country, safeguarding shipping and seafarer welfare since its establishment in 1929. Headed by the Principal Officer, the department was created to enforce the Merchant Shipping Acts and Rules, covering safety of ships and life at sea, registration of vessels, tonnage measurement, crew accommodation, and the oversight of safety construction and communication systems.

From its earliest years, MMD Kolkata has played a pivotal role in ensuring compliance with international conventions through surveys of passenger ships, inspection of statutory equipment, approval of life-saving appliances and fire-fighting systems, and monitoring of radio telegraphy and the Global Maritime Distress and Safety System. Its mandate has steadily expanded to include Port State Control inspections, pollution prevention measures, casualty investigations, and the examination and certification of seafarers.

The roots of mercantile marine administration in India can be traced to a series of debates in the 1920s. Records show that in September 1924, correspondence between the Government of India and the Bengal Marine Department examined whether ports and shipping should remain a central subject or be provincialised. Recognising the national and international significance of shipping, navigation, lighthouses, port quarantine and major ports, the Government of India decided these must remain under central authority.

This principle was reinforced in November 1927, when Sir Geoffrey Corbett, Secretary to the Government of India, Department of Commerce, addressed provincial governments on the structure of mercantile marine



administration. A national conference brought together local governments, Port Trust chairmen, port officers and health officers to deliberate on whether merchant shipping matters should be managed locally or directly by the Governor-General in Council. The outcome was the establishment of Principal Officers of the MMDs, reporting directly to the central government, ensuring uniformity and independence in maritime governance.

At the time, India's coastline was divided into six districts centred on Aden, Karachi, Bombay, Madras, Calcutta and Rangoon. Each was placed under a Principal Officer as the chief executive authority for mercantile marine administration. The adoption of the "Principal Officer" designation echoed practices in the United Kingdom, giving clarity to shipowners and seafarers about the officer's regulatory role, distinct from port conservancy functions under the Port Trusts.

In this framework, MMD Kolkata became the focal point for maritime oversight in eastern India. For nearly a century, it has anchored India's compliance with safety norms, enabled seafarer certification, and supported the growth of shipping in the region. As India's maritime traffic and global role expand, MMD Kolkata continues to embody the principles of safety, accountability and service that guided its creation in 1929.

MMD MUMBAI

Guardian of India's Western Seaboard and Maritime Future

Capt. Abul Kalam Azad
 Principal Officer, MMD Mumbai, DGS

Along the western shores of India, where history, trade and tradition converge, the Mercantile Marine Department (MMD), Mumbai, has stood as one of the steadfast guardian of maritime safety and regulation for 95 years. Established in 1929 under the then Department of Commerce and the Merchant Shipping Act, 1923, MMD Mumbai remains the most pivotal field office of the Directorate General of Shipping (DGS), serving as the regulatory backbone of India's shipping sector.

Initially created alongside MMDs in Karachi, Madras, Calcutta and Rangoon, the Mumbai office gained prominence after 1949, when the DGS was constituted and brought under the Government of India's central authority. Today, MMD Mumbai's jurisdiction extends across Maharashtra and Goa, enforcing safety, security, environmental standards and crew welfare across one of the country's busiest maritime corridors.

At its core, MMD Mumbai is led by its Principal Officer, a position first held by Capt. E V Wish in 1930. The



office has since been headed by some of the finest officers in India's mercantile marine, including B K Gupta, the first Indian appointed in 1951. Supported by a team of deputy advisors, surveyors and administrative staff, the office delivers wide-ranging regulatory functions.

Foremost among these is ship registration. The first vessel registered by MMD Mumbai was the Dayavati in October 1929. Since then, the office has led India's ship registry, recording more vessels under the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958, and the Coasting Vessels Act, 1838 than all other MMDs combined. It played a central role in the "golden age" of Indian shipping between 1960 and 1975, when the national fleet grew from 1 million GT to 5 million GT.

Its responsibilities go far beyond registration. MMD Mumbai conducts vessel surveys and certification, audits

ships for ISPS, ISM and MLC compliance, issues petroleum licences, inspects fishing vessels, and oversees both Flag State and Port State Control inspections. It also examines and certifies seafarers, approves and audits maritime training institutes, and inspects ports and terminals within its jurisdiction. The department further contributes to contingency response, casualty investigations, and provides inputs to DGS on policy formulation.

MMD Mumbai's stakeholders range from global shipping lines and shipowners to port operators, RPST holders, shipyards, bunker suppliers, training institutes and service providers. The department has built a reputation for outreach and grievance redressal, maintaining trust with both domestic and international maritime communities.

For 95 years, MMD Mumbai has been more than an office of regulation; it has been an enabler of India's maritime growth. As shipping evolves with technology, sustainability and globalisation, MMD Mumbai remains committed to guiding Indian shipping with the same vigilance, expertise and dedication that has defined its legacy since 1929.

STCW

India's STCW Journey: Advancing Maritime Training and Certification

Capt. Ravi Singh Sikarwar
 Nautical Surveyor-cum-Deputy Director General (Tech.), DGS

The International Convention on Standards of Training, Certification and Watchkeeping for Seafarers (STCW), adopted by the International Maritime Organization (IMO) in 1978, marked a turning point in maritime regulation. Before its adoption, training and certification standards varied widely, creating inconsistencies in a global industry. The STCW Convention introduced harmonised standards for training, certification, and watchkeeping worldwide.

India ratified the Convention in 1984. As a littoral State and signatory, India, through the Directorate General of Shipping (DGS), became responsible for



“INDIA FOLLOWS A HARMONISED STANDARD FOR TRAINING, CERTIFICATION, AND WATCH KEEPING OF ITS SEAFARERS.

ensuring compliance. A major milestone was India's inclusion in the IMO "White List," recognising its training and certification systems as fully compliant.

Over the years, the Directorate has developed a comprehensive framework for examinations, approvals, audits, and assessments. Even during COVID-19, continuity was ensured through online orals, virtual audits, and hybrid modular courses. Modernisation has since accelerated, with digital Certificates of Competency (CoCs), online applications, and biometric INDoS registration reinforcing efficiency, transparency, and security.

To strengthen training quality, syllabi across Near Coastal Voyage (NCV) and Foreign Going (FG) categories have been revised. Recognising of traditional assessment, the DGS is introducing web-based simulation tools such as ECDis to support scenario-based evaluations. Structured transition schemes under DGS Order No. 17 of 2022 also facilitate the entry of serving and retired Indian Navy personnel into the Merchant Navy.

Internationally, India is collaborating with various partner countries to provide training in STCW-compliant polar operations. In parallel, work has begun on a unified order on safe manning of Indian ships, aligning with IMO Resolution A.1047(27) and the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958.

India's STCW journey is not just about certificates, but about building careers, ensuring safety, and reinforcing global trust.

TRANSITION FROM DGS TO DGMA

Merchant Shipping Act, 2025: A Progressive Shift in India's Maritime Framework

Ash Mohomad
 Deputy Director General of Shipping, DGS

Over the decades, the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958 had become a bulky piece of legislation due to various amendments carried out in the Act from time to time. Owing to frequent amendments between 1966 and 2014, the number of provisions expanded to more than 560 sections, rendering the legislation cumbersome and fragmented.

The New Merchant Shipping Act, 2025 (24 of 2025) has been recently passed by both Houses of Parliament during the Monsoon session in August 2025 and has received the assent of the President of India on 18.08.2025. The said Act has been duly published

in the Official Gazette of India. Upon coming into force, the Merchant Shipping Act, 2025 shall repeal and replace the Merchant Shipping Act, 1958.

The Merchant Shipping Act, 2025 has streamlined the legislative framework by consolidating and rationalising its provisions into a compact structure of 325 sections across 16 Parts, effectively removing redundancies and overlaps. The legislation has evolved through extensive consultations into a comprehensive statute aimed at modernising India's maritime framework, aligning domestic laws with international best practices and International Maritime Organization (IMO) conventions.

Key reforms include the



Sarbananda Sonowal, Union Minister, Ministry of Ports, Shipping & Waterways (MoPSW), presented the Merchant Shipping Bill in the parliament which has been passed and the gazette notification issued as MS Act 2025

renaming of the Director General of Shipping as the Director General of Maritime Administration (DGMA) and placing strong

emphasis on seafarer welfare, growth of tonnage under the Indian flag, and ship safety and security. The Act also addresses the

protection of the marine environment and preparedness for marine emergencies.

Significant measures to promote tonnage under the

Indian flag include expanded ownership criteria for vessel registration, registration of non-mechanically propelled vessels, and registration without requiring a call at an Indian port. Provisions on maritime education and seafarer welfare have been updated based on IMO/ILO Conventions, and chapters for Survey, Audit, and Certification have been included.

The DGMA is empowered to issue directions to ports and the Director General of Lighthouses and Lightships to ensure compliance with international conventions. The Act also promotes transparency in charges levied to service providers and decriminalises minor offences to boost investor confidence, while serious matters remain under

court jurisdiction.

The Merchant Shipping Act, 2025 is a decisive step towards positioning India as a trusted global maritime hub. It represents a transformative shift from a regulation-heavy framework to a facilitative policy environment that boosts investor confidence, raises safety standards, safeguards the marine ecosystem, and strengthens India's position as a maritime power.

This Act incorporates global best practices, reduces compliance burdens, and ensures comprehensive adoption of India's international commitments, all of which will catalyse growth and sustainability in the sector. It addresses the critical objectives of increasing tonnage under the Indian

flag, reducing compliance burdens, and strengthening coastal security. By doing so, the Act empowers Indian ports and shipping to shoulder a larger share of global trade—driving economic growth, generating employment, and contributing directly to the national vision of Viksit Bharat. The New Merchant Shipping Act, 2025 will shift the focus from mere regulation to facilitation, thereby advancing India's credibility and bankability as a maritime jurisdiction. This progressive approach is intended to attract greater global investment, stimulate employment generation, and foster a resilient environment for the sustainable and inclusive growth of the maritime sector.

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