INDIA MUST CONSIDER DRONES AND DATA ANALYTICS TO SECURE ITS COAST

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Since the 2008 Mumbai terror attack, Pakistan-based militant outfits have reportedly begun to see India's coastline as the weak point in the country's border defences. This renewed maritime interest may reflect a desire for Rawalpindi to inflict pain on India while avoiding the international interest that fighting along the Line of Control attracts. While India's coastal defences are in much better shape than they were in 2011, it is true India's 7,500 kilometre-long coast is hardly proofed against terrorist infiltration. The second line of defence, the state coastal police, is particularly wanting.

After Mumbai 26/11, New Delhi rolled out a coastal security scheme, the second part of which will end in 2020. The scheme has accomplished a number of goals: beginning the process of tagging fishing boats; infusing training and equipment into India's derelict coast guard; and setting up an extensive network of radars, cameras and other sensors along the coast. Many of these programmes are ongoing. Thus the coast guard still has less than half the aircraft it needs. Identifying and persuading fishermen to put location beacons on their boats is almost as much a social movement as a technological fix. However, the open seas that met the Lashkar-e-Taiba operatives in 2008 are a thing of the past.

But there are several lacunae. There continues to be far too many government agencies involved in coastal and maritime security. At last count, 15 different bodies had some jurisdiction in the matter. Coordination will remain a challenge and will be sorely tested when the next attack comes. The response of state governments has been varied: Gujarat and Tamil Nadu have been exemplary; other states treat the matter lightly. Goa has seven coastal police stations for its roughly 100-kilometre long shore. Karnataka, with four times the coastline, has only eight. In any case, many of these coastal stations are unmanned or poorly maintained. The original requirement that only vessels over 20 metres long need tracking beacons should be reconsidered — tens of thousands of vessels are outside the security net as a consequence.

Terrorist techniques do not remain static. The trick is to be a step or two ahead of them. India carried out coastal defence reforms after the 1993 Mumbai bomb blasts. Fifteen years later, those were found wanting. India must look to new technologies like data analytics and networked drones to prevent the attacks of the future. As India begins the infrastructural transformation of its east coast, it will need to ensure the new security system it installs — and this includes container inspection and underwater early warning — are driven by the lessons of the past but also the expectations of the future.

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