



DAILY EDITORIAL ANALYSIS

TOPIC

**INDIA'S MARITIME WORKFORCE:
INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY NEEDS TO
LOOK SEAWARD**

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Context

- Recent attacks on commercial shipping routes in the Red Sea and West Asia that killed Indian seafarers have highlighted the vulnerabilities of India's maritime workforce and the need for better protection mechanisms.

Indian Maritime Workforce (Indian Seafarers)

- India has become one of the leading suppliers of maritime manpower in the world.
- India ranks second only to the Philippines in the Seafarer Workforce Report 2026, with more than 12% of the world's seafaring workforce.
- India had almost 3.2 lakh registered seafarers (June 2025), close to three times the number in 2014.
- Indian seafarers are employed in a highly globalised environment – they work on ships owned, managed, insured and flagged by countries other than India.
- They often lie outside the purview of any one national jurisdiction despite their significant contribution to international trade and India's remittance inflows in emergencies.

Challenges Faced by Indian Seafarers

- Jurisdictional Complexity:** A seafarer may be recruited in India and employed by a foreign company, sail under a foreign flag and face emergencies in other country's waters.
 - It creates uncertainty about who should rescue, provide legal aid and repatriate.
- Growing Security Threats:** Indian crews are increasingly facing:
 - Missile, drone strikes in Red Sea and Black Sea.
 - Piracy and hostage-taking in the Gulf of Aden and West African waters
 - Risks of geopolitical conflict even though civilian workers.
- Crew Abandonment:** Indian seafarers topped the list of abandoned crew in 2025, with 1,125 crew reported so by the International Transport Workers' Federation (ITF).
 - Continuing concerns are delayed wages, shortages of food and difficulties of repatriation.
- Weak Consular Protection:** India's consular assistance is arranged geographically, while ships traverse jurisdictions all the time.
 - Indian missions are often not aware of affected seafarers until after an incident occurs.
- Information Asymmetry:** many seafarers sign contracts without full knowledge of the real owner of the vessel, sanctions that may have been imposed on the vessel, the validity of insurance, the history of abandonment of the crew on board the vessel, or the voyage through areas of conflict.
- Weak Enforcement By Flag States:** Some flag states, which are open registries, will register vessels but do not enforce the obligations under the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), 2006, particularly in relation to wages, welfare and repatriation.

Government Responses / Initiatives

- Seafarer First Initiative:** Following recent attacks in West Asia, the Government has announced the Seafarer First response, which includes:
 - Covering all Indian seafarers in West Asia regardless of vessel flag.
 - Centralised dashboard to monitor ships, threat levels and crew welfare.
 - Each family affected will have one liaison officer assigned to it.
- High-Risk Areas Advisory:** The Government has advised ship owners, managers and recruitment agencies not to send Indian seafarers via the Strait of Hormuz until further orders.

- **Recruitment Agency Regulations:** The Directorate General of Shipping (DG Shipping) has barred licensed recruitment agencies from deploying Indian seafarers on 366 vessels with crew abandonment cases unless there are prescribed compliance conditions.
- **Institutional Framework:** Directorate General of Shipping regulates recruitment agencies, and also certifies Indian seafarers.
 - ♦ India is a signatory to the Maritime Labour Convention (MLC), 2006 which prescribes minimum standards concerning employment, welfare and repatriation.

Way Forward

- **Develop a Permanent Maritime Consular Protocol:** India should develop a standard operating framework delineating roles and responsibilities from the time a distress signal is received to facilitate seamless coordination between Indian missions, flag states, insurers, and shipowners.
- **Strengthen Maritime Diplomacy:** Indian missions in key shipping centres must have dedicated maritime officers who are well versed with local port authorities, hospitals, insurers and legal systems.
- **Increase Transparency of Vessels Before Recruitment:** Mandatory disclosure of beneficial ownership, status of insurance, sanctions history, past cases of crew abandonment and likely high-risk routes by recruitment agencies.
- **Uphold Seafarers' Right to Refuse Dangerous Voyages:** Seafarers should have the legal right not to be deployed to officially designated conflict zones without jeopardising their employment or contractual rights.
- **Enhance International Cooperation:** India should work with large labour supplying countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia through the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and the International Labour Organization (ILO) to frame common standards on deployment in conflict zones, detention, abandonment and repatriation.
- **Strengthen Real-Time Welfare Monitoring:** The proposed dashboard should be institutionalised across all high-risk maritime zones, and periodic crew welfare reporting and family communication mechanisms should be established.

Conclusion

- India's maritime ambitions go beyond ports, shipping corridors and naval strength – they lie equally in the welfare of the seafarers who underpin global commerce.
- There is a need for stronger legal safeguards, proactive diplomacy, transparent recruitment and coordinated international action to ensure the protection of Indian seafarers.
- No matter what flag a ship flies, India's responsibility to its citizens should be the same.

Daily Mains Practice Question

[Q] Examine the major challenges faced by Indian seafarers. Discuss the measures taken by the Government of India and suggest reforms to strengthen their safety and welfare.

Source: TH

