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PrepAlpine

Email: info@PrepAlpine.com

Website: PrepAlpine.com

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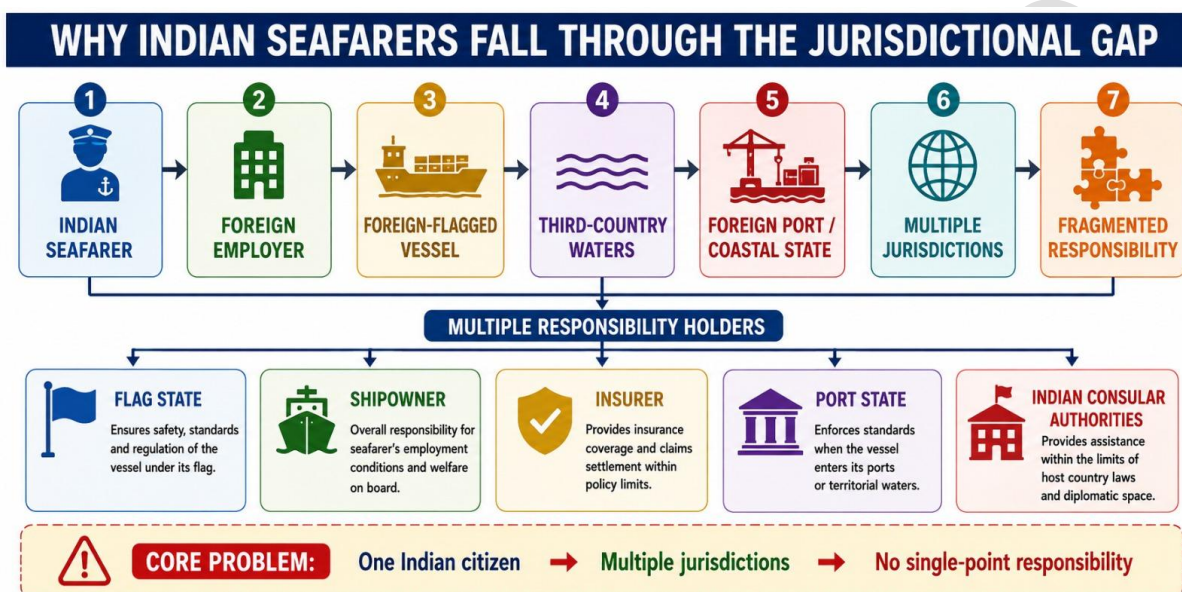
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GS Paper II: International Relations

1. India's Foreign Policy Must Look Seaward – Maritime Diplomacy & Protection of Indian Seafarers

a. Introduction

Recent conflicts in West Asia, the Red Sea and Black Sea have exposed Indian seafarers aboard foreign-flagged commercial vessels to missile attacks, drones, detention and abandonment. India's growing maritime workforce therefore creates a foreign-policy challenge that goes beyond conventional concerns of ports, naval power and sea lanes.



b. Why are Indian seafarers uniquely vulnerable?

India has emerged as a major supplier of the global maritime workforce, with about 3.2 lakh seafarers (2025) and over 12% of global supply.

However, maritime employment produces a distinctive jurisdictional gap:

Indian seafarer → Foreign employer → Foreign-flagged vessel → Third-country waters/port → Multiple legal jurisdictions

Consequently, responsibility can become fragmented among the flag State, shipowner, insurer, port State and Indian consular authorities.

The problem is aggravated by:

- **Conflict-zone exposure:** Commercial vessels increasingly face missiles, drones and mines in geopolitical conflicts.
- **Piracy and hostage-taking:** Risks persist around the Gulf of Aden and West Africa.
- **Flags of convenience:** The State registering a vessel may lack either capacity or willingness to enforce labour protections.
- **Crew abandonment:** International Transport Workers' Federation data recorded 1,125 Indian seafarers abandoned in 2025, highlighting weak employer accountability.
- **Territorial nature of diplomacy:** Indian missions operate territorially, while a seafarer's workplace constantly crosses jurisdictions.

c. Emerging Indian Response

Following recent West Asian hostilities, India announced a “Seafarer First” response, involving:

- accounting for Indian seafarers in affected regions irrespective of the vessel's flag;
- a dashboard tracking vessels, threats and crew welfare;
- liaison officers for affected families; and
- restrictions on deploying Indian seafarers on vessels passing through designated high-risk regions such as the Strait of Hormuz.

The Directorate General of Shipping has also restricted recruitment agencies from placing Indians aboard identified vessels associated with crew-abandonment risks.

d. Why seafarer protection should become a foreign-policy priority

- **From territorial to mobile consular diplomacy:** Traditional consular systems are designed around citizens located within another State. Seafarers require protection that can operate across borders, ports and flag jurisdictions.
- **Human dimension of maritime security:** India's maritime strategy generally emphasises ports, trade corridors, naval capabilities and freedom of navigation. But secure sea lanes are incomplete without security of civilian crews operating on them.
- **Strategic autonomy and civilian shipping:** India should consistently oppose attacks on civilian commercial shipping irrespective of the perpetrator. Seafarers should not become collateral participants in geopolitical conflicts merely because of a vessel's ownership or cargo.
- **Labour diplomacy:** Protection against unpaid wages, abandonment and delayed repatriation requires India to engage not only host governments but also flag States, shipowners and insurers.
- **Information asymmetry:** Seafarers may sign contracts without adequate knowledge of beneficial ownership, sanctions exposure, insurance status or previous abandonment records of vessels.

e. Institutional Gaps

India's bilateral maritime agreements largely focus on recognition of qualifications and employment opportunities, while providing inadequate mechanisms for consular assistance, detention and repatriation.

Moreover, technology can identify the location of a vessel but cannot determine or enforce responsibility. Tracking systems therefore need to be backed by legal and diplomatic arrangements.

f. Way Forward

- Establish a standing Maritime Consular Protocol defining responsibility from the moment an Indian seafarer faces distress.
- Designate specialised maritime officers in Indian missions at major global shipping hubs, with networks involving port authorities, insurers, hospitals and lawyers.
- Mandate pre-deployment disclosure of vessel ownership, sanctions exposure, insurance and abandonment history.
- Guarantee seafarers a right to refuse deployment into officially designated high-risk zones without employment penalty.
- Strengthen cooperation with major seafarer-supplying countries such as the Philippines and Indonesia to negotiate common standards on detention, repatriation and conflict-zone deployment.

- Use the International Maritime Organization (IMO) and International Labour Organization (ILO) to strengthen enforcement of the Maritime Labour Convention and accountability of flag States.

Conclusion

India's rise as a maritime power must be measured not merely through ports, corridors, naval deployments and tonnage, but also through its capacity to protect the Indians who operate global shipping. A genuinely seaward-looking foreign policy therefore requires a shift from territorial consular protection to mobile, preventive and rules-based maritime diplomacy.

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While every effort has been made to balance depth with brevity, please keep the following in mind:

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- data recall
- Prelims-style MCQs
- objective pattern analysis

This Prelims Edition will be released separately as a standalone publication.

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