



**Red Lantern
ANALYTICA**

NOT JUST STRAITS OR SHIPS, SAILORS FIRST:

INDIA'S MARITIME WIN AT BRICS 2026



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Geopolitical conflicts have turned the world's critical sea lanes into war zones.

First the Black Sea since 2022 with Russia-Ukraine war, then the Red Sea from late 2023 with the Houthi attacks on commercial shipping, and since February 2026, the Persian Gulf, particularly the Strait of Hormuz became highly vulnerable amid escalating US-Israel-Iran tensions. These conflicts have demonstrated how quickly geopolitical tensions can endanger vital sea lanes, cripple global energy and trade routes, and place commercial shipping at risk.

Yet the gravest consequence has been borne by seafarers, who now find themselves navigating waters where missile strikes, drone attacks, and armed confrontations can turn an ordinary commercial voyage into a life-and-death situation. While many countries have condemned attacks on merchant shipping and launched various regional measures to protect shipping and sea-lanes, India's stake in seafarer security remains uniquely significant.

India alone accounts for 12.16% of the world's seafarers - the second-largest supplier after the Philippines, and ahead of China, Russia, and Indonesia. In this context, India's successful call to place seafarer safety in the opening remarks of the Indian Prime Minister at the BRICS Summit in New Delhi is a significant diplomatic achievement. It shows maritime security from a tangible humanitarian priority for the Global South.



Seafarer Security Gaps: In the Black Sea, Red Sea, and Hormuz

The Black Sea, Red Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz regions are entangled in different conflicts involving different state and non-state actors pursuing different strategic objectives. Although shipping turned into a geopolitical leverage for actors, it collectively revealed a growing vulnerability: for the first time, in decades, large numbers of commercial vessels, civilian seafarers are being drawing simultaneously in geopolitical conflicts. Seafarers are increasingly exposed to attack, injury, detention, abandonment, communication failures, and prolonged disruption without a coordinated and effective mechanism for protection.

For instance, in July 2026, the cargo vessel - MV Golden Leo cargo was attacked while departing from Odesa in Black Sea. Under a Guinea-Bissau flag, with 17 crew members (5 Indian nationals), the commercial vessel became the target of geopolitical conflict. Four Indian seafarers were killed, and another was severely injured. Indian authorities condemned the attack and stated that targeting commercial shipping and innocent civilian crews is deplorable. This shows how commercial vessels and their multinational crews have become victims of geopolitical conflict.

Similarly, in the Red Sea region, the first commercial vessel seized by the Houthis after the outbreak of the Israel-Gaza war the Galaxy Leader in November 2023. The Bahamas-flagged, Japanese-operated, and British-owned car carrier carried a multi-national crew, who

were held hostage for more than a year before being released in January 2025. Across three years, more than a hundred merchant attacks complicated the commercial shipping and civilian seafarers' situation in the Red Sea region.

Likewise, what began as the U.S.-Israel-Iran conflict in early 2026 brought commercial shipping in and around Strait of Hormuz into the conflict zone. The International Maritime Organisation (IMO) recorded nearly 80 attacks on international vessels in the area, affecting around 400 ships carrying around 6,000 seafarers. The conflict zone in the Persian Gulf resulted in the deaths of at least 22 seafarers and injuries to many others,[1]

For Indian seafarers, the effect of the conflict was much severe and disproportionate. Since February 28, 2026, multiple vessels carrying Indian crew members have been attacked, damaged, or sunk. For instance, Indian seafarers were killed in incidents involving vessels such as Skylight[2], MKD Vyom[3], Safesea Vishnu[4], MT Settebello,[5] and MT Al Bahiyah,[6] while many seafarers were evacuated or rescued from vessels including Haji Ali,[7] MT Marivex,[8] MT Jalveer,[9] MSV Virat-1,[10] GFS Galaxy,[11] MT Mombasa,[12] Riesco, Horizon 1 and Mersin Prosperity, MT El Gaia (1 missing still).[13] Most of these vessels carried either entirely Indian crews or a majority of Indian seafarers, showing the disproportionate share of Indian seafarers exposed to maritime insecurity in the region.

India's Response at Domestic Level

India's response to the Hormuz crisis focused on continuous monitoring, protecting seafarers through search-and-rescue operations jointly with authorities of Oman, providing consular and medical assistance, and accelerating repatriation efforts, while simultaneously pursuing diplomatic engagement, formal protests against attacks on commercial shipping, and reiteration of human security along with sea-lane and civilian infrastructure security.

Generally, a vessel may be owned, flagged, and crewed by different nationalities, and in many recent maritime incidents involving Indian seafarers, the vessels concerned were foreign flagged. Under Article 94 of United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the effective jurisdiction over a vessel is firmly relied on the flag it flies, not the nationality of the crew.



So, the flag state has the obligation to oversee its vessel for the ship's safety, technical seaworthiness, administrative, and social matters such as overseeing the detention, abandonment, or casualties of the crew flying its flag.[1] The flag state is also the primary investigating party to raise inquiries into high-sea casualties of its crew and authority over the vessel. Thus, when Indian seafarers work on foreign-flagged vessels, India's role is limited and it cannot exercise the same authority over the vessel as the flag state even if the ship has entirely Indian crew. So, if Indian sailors face abandonment, detention, or casualties, the role is limited to diplomatic intervention, consular assistance, repatriation, and raising concerns before international bodies such as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO).



To address the gap between flag-state responsibility and crew nationality, the Indian government has increasingly assumed a proactive role in protection of its crew on foreign-flagged vessels operating in conflict zones based on “nationality-based seafarer protection.” The government introduced dedicated liaison officers for every affected seafarer providing a single contact for coordinating with families, handling medical updates, welfare support, repatriation, compensation, and wages. The Directorate General of Shipping (DGS), the nodal authority responsible for maritime safety, merchant shipping regulation, and the welfare of Indian seafarers, has also played a key role by monitoring and addressing the issues round-the-clock. In the view of ‘Seafarer-First’ framework, Indian government is also actively developing an operational vessel-by-vessel operation dashboard covering critical details such as vessel position, ownership, cargo, crew composition, voyage status and other details and operationalised eNavik Portal in July 2026 to provide 24x7 reporting on seafarer information.

Since Indian government cannot legally order the foreign-flagged ships to proceed with certain measure, India has been actively coordinating with Indian missions in Iran, Oman, and UAE to successfully repatriate hundreds of standard sailors. Building on this domestic foundation, India proposed a ‘Seafarer Emergency Support’ initiative to speak for seafarer interests at multilateral level, under its own BRICS presidency and summit.



BRICS 2026: India's Proposal for Seafarer Emergency Support

India's proposal of a 'Seafarer Emergency Support Network' is a real maritime win as it directly falls under India's BRICS Chairship theme of people-centric and humanity-first approach. According to the proposal, the Indian government pushes for greater cooperation in safeguarding seafarers affected by disruptions at sea by connecting the maritime authorities and embassies into one integrated network and facilitate distress alerts, medical assistance, contacting families, evacuation of seafarers.

With Indian nationals accounting for around 12% of the global maritime workforce, the BRICS platform provides India with a valuable opportunity and at the right moment to champion for greater attention to seafarer security, welfare, and crisis-response mechanisms.

Through this proposal, India opened a diplomatic channel on seafarer security at the Summit and highlighted maritime security as a humanitarian priority for the Global South.

In sum, elevating the seafarer security as a strategic necessity is both a moral imperative and an immediate requirement for India as the country aspires to raise its share of the global seafaring workforce to 20% by 2030. In an era where critical sea lanes are at risk, it is no longer just about smooth trade, sea-lane security or protection of ships - it is also about the safety of the sailors'. The real test now lies in translating the proposed Seafarers Emergency Support into an operational mechanism.

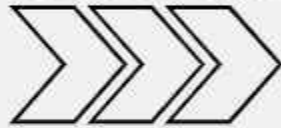
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