

SethuSamudram Project: Geopolitics and History

Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project: Counterterrorism Perspectives

By Dr. RamaHaritha Pusarla

*Whoever controls the Indian Ocean dominates Asia. This Ocean is the key to seven seas in the 21st century, the destiny of the World will be decided in these waters-
Alfred Thayer Mahan*

Sethusamudram Shipping Canal Project (SSCP) was first conceived by the Head of the British Survey Department AD Taylor in 1860 to link the Gulf of Mannar on the Western Coast with the Palk Bay on India's East Coast. But the British gave up the idea by 1870 and began construction of the Pamban Canal instead¹. After independence, the government constituted a committee headed by Sir Ramaswamy Mudaliar to assess the feasibility of the project and its impact on the port of Tuticorin in 1955. The committee that the canal and Port of Tuticorin working in tandem can catalyse development in the region. In 1963 government approved the Tuticorin project².

Since the construction of the canal involved cutting through the Rama Setu or the Adam's Bridge, a natural limestone shoal cemented with linear coral reefs, the proposal has been intensely opposed on religious, environmental, ecological and economic grounds. In 2004, the UPA government as a special purpose vehicle set up Sethusamudram Corporation Limited (SCL) and inaugurated the project in 2005. Opposing the dredging process, the aggrieved parties took to court which restrained the centre from damaging the Rama Setu in 2007. This issue has been indefinitely adjourned in the court³.

Responding to a fresh PIL on the declaration of Rama Setu as a national monument, Supreme Court has asked the centre to take a decision⁴. Pending central government's decision, the Tamil Nadu government on January 12th unanimously adopted a resolution urging the government to implement the Sethusamudram Project⁵. Even as the scrapping of SCL is on cards, the fresh ruckus by the Tamil

Nadu state government to revive the project is now forcing a fresh review of the project on many other aspects including the threat of terrorism.

Counter Terrorism Challenges

India has been the worst victim of cross-terrorism since its independence and it continues to pose a major threat to the internal security of the country. Of the numerous cross-border terror attacks, the 26/11 Mumbai attacks which killed 166 people including citizens from over a dozen countries stood out for the first time with the attackers entering the Indian territory by waters. Aside from the infiltration through porous borders, threats from maritime terrorism became an inevitable reality.

Instructively, shaken up the dastardly 9/11 attacks to safeguard the global commons from plausible threats, the International Maritime Organization (IMO) devised a comprehensive set of maritime measures for the safety and security of ships and ports. It has brought out the International Ship and Port Facility or in short ISPS code which came into force from July 1, 2004⁵. Accordingly, the member countries subject the ships go through a system of survey, verification, and certification to avert any threats on the high seas which are an easy way to enter foreign territory.

However, vessels less than 500 tonnes and all fishing vessels irrespective of size are excluded from this code. Circumventing the ISPS code, terrorists started using smaller boats to smuggle weapons and ammunition. After 26/11, India established the National Committee on Strengthening Maritime and Coastal Security (NCSMCS) headed by a cabinet secretary in 2009 to bring together all the stakeholders to address the coastal security challenges.

NCSMCS improved the coordination between Indian Navy, Coast Guard, Marine and other marine agencies. Additionally, to improve coastal security colour coded fishing boats were introduced, and Joint Operation Centres were set up to monitor the exchange of information. To increase Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), India has set up National Command Control Communication and Intelligence Network (NC3I) also inaugurated in 2014⁷ and inked White Shipping information sharing agreements. In December 2018, India unveiled the Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR) to coordinate with partner countries to enhance regional security and address maritime terrorism, piracy, human and drug trafficking⁸. Along side India

has strengthened its Coordinated Patrols (CORPATs) with Thailand, Myanmar, Indonesia and Bangladesh

India steadily stepped-up coastal surveillance in the wake of a slew of developments in the region. In 2014, operatives of Al-Qaeda Indian Subcontinent (AQIS) attempted to take control of PNS Zulfikar berthed at Karachi port to attack US warships. Together seen in the light of foiled attempt of TTP and Al-Qaeda jointly on PNS Mehran in 2011, underscored the potential maritime threat from terrorists to the Naval assets, high-value hardware, ships and submarines⁹. In 2015, IS terrorists carried out bomb blasts in Naval base near Chittagong¹⁰. Mumbai attack has shown that Pakistani terror operatives have capabilities to launch attack via seas. 26/11 accused David Coleman Hadley has revealed that Pakistan Navy deep sea divers or frogman have offered training to attackers involved in Mumbai attacks. By 2018, reliable reports citing Pakistani officials confirmed that JeM (Jaish-e-Mohammed) is rigorously training to build sea strike abilities.

LeT's front organisations like Falah-e-Insaniyat Foundation, Al Dawa Water Rescue, Life Line Water Rescue and Rescue Mili Foundation are involved in imparting deep water diving techniques to JeM's cadres at swimming pools in Sheikhpura, Lahore and Faisalabad¹¹. Confirming these developments, Indian government alerted the agencies of "Samundari Jihad". In the wake of these developments in the region, India has sufficiently buttressed maritime surveillance and bolstered the counter terrorism measures as well.

Terror threats from Pakistan have been relentless and to steer its anti-India doctrine, Islamabad has always explored the possibility of using Sri Lanka to encircle and attack India. Sri Lanka has supported Pakistan on Afghanistan, offered transit facilities during 1971 Bangladesh Liberation. Colombo helped Pakistan to get into the Common Wealth, played cricket with Pakistan in 2009 to prevent its international isolation as well. Colombo astutely cultivated relations with Pakistan and China.

Sri Lanka indeed sourced majority of its small weapons from Pakistan for its civil war against LTTE. Pakistan has even trained Sri Lankan army personnel. Both of them have deep defence cooperation and intelligence gathering. The deputation of the High Commissioners to each other's countries is in line with policy of fostering military cooperation¹². Stunning details of ISI using the Pakistan High Commissioner

in Colombo to attack the India assets through Sri Lankan Muslims came to light in 2014 with arrest of one handler in Chennai¹³.

In 2018, NIA sought an International red corner notice from Interpol against of Pakistani commissioner in Sri Lanka, Amir Zubair Siddiqui for employing Sri Lankan Muslims to launch attack on US and Israel consulate in Bengaluru. Siddiqui planned to send explosives from Mannar in Sri Lanka to between Rameshwaram and Tuticorn in India by a rowing boat¹⁴. Since 1980s Islamization has taken strong roots in Pakistan which not only changed the outlook of the nation but slowly began to spread beyond its boundaries.

During 2004 tsunami, the charity wing of LeT, Falah-i-Insaniyat actively engaged in relief operations in Sri Lanka and sowed the seeds of radicalisation in the emerald island. The hardline Wahhabism spread by this organisation eventually led to proliferation of several radical outfits including the National Thawheed Jamat (NTJ) which orchestrated seven serial blasts in 2019 leading to the death of over 350 civilians¹⁵.

LeT also has close ties with LTTE. As per reports, LTTE provided weapons to Muslim radicals in the island as early as 1992. Also, strategic geographical location of Sri Lanka is favoured by jihadists to have an access to all South Asian countries and to expand their drug cartel networks. Drug trafficking is the main source of finances for these jihadi networks¹⁶.

The Sethusamudram Canal which is 30 km from the LTTE can thus be inimical to India's security. International agencies named three agencies in the sub-continent capable of carrying terrorist attacks at sea which are LTTE, LeT and Al-Qaeda. The Black Sea Tigers and Air Tigers have in the past attacked the Sri Lankan ships and carried night bombings of airports¹⁷.

With reports of regrouping of the diminished LTTE on cards¹⁸, the threat from the LTTE can't be ruled out till Sri Lanka implements the 13th Amendment in word and spirit. As early as 2008, for the first Vice-Admiral Rustam F Contractor has gone on record to say that Sethusamudram channel is a "security risk" to the country¹⁹.

Aside from the existing threats, analysts have opined best ports in Asia facing the challenge of tracking, monitoring and scanning the containers. Absence of proper

checks increases the possibility of smuggling arms, explosives, weapons and even the handlers through these ports²⁰. The existing maritime regulations including the International Safety Management Code (ISM) are falling woefully short in tackling the new forms of terrorism like drone attacks. Drone attacks on maritime vessels in the Persian Gulf has underscored the gaps in legal obligations and the slack implementation of existing practices²¹.

Anticipating burgeoning asymmetric threats, India has inaugurated underwater surveillance Integrated Underwater Defence and Surveillance Systems (IUHDSS), a state of art system comprising of layered security network of sonar, electro-optic sensors and radars²² in 2017. While India is steadily stepping up security measures and strengthening coordination between different agencies, the imminent threat from remains high.

The advantages of having a seamless connectivity between the West and East Coast of India through the construction of Sethusamudram canal far are miniscule compared to the dangers it would entail. Notwithstanding the demerits, the political parties are vehemently standing their ground to implement this proposal. Owing to the closure of the Sterlite Copper Plant, ship calls at Port of Tuticorin has reduced drastically, leaving thousands of people jobless. The economy in the region took a massive and several ship freighters have closed their business²³. Reportedly with leaders of current ruling dispensation having stakes in shipping companies, Tamil Nadu has passed a resolution to expedite the Sethusamudram Ship Canal Project.

References

1. Arup Chatterjee, October 2022, Do you believe in Ram Setu? Adam's Bridge, epistemic plurality and colonial legacy
<https://islandstudiesjournal.org/files/ISJ.405.pdf>
2. GM Hiranandani, February, 2009, The Sethusamudram Ship Canal project
<http://www.indiandefencereview.com/news/the-sethusamudram-ship-canal-project/0/>
3. Modi government to close Sethusamudram Corporation Limited,
<https://news.abplive.com/news/india/pm-modi-government-to-close->

[sethusamudram-corporation-limited-ram-setu-setusamudram-project-india-sri-lanka-1534940](https://www.sethusamudram-corporation-limited-ram-setu-setusamudram-project-india-sri-lanka-1534940)

4. Issue of declaring Rama Sethu a national heritage under process: Centre to SC, January 2023 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/india/issue-of-declaring-ram-sethu-as-national-heritage-monument-under-process-centre-to-sc/articleshow/97128107.cms?from=mdr>
5. Julie Mariappan, Tamilnadu assembly adopts resolution to revive Sethusamudram Ship Channel Project, January 2023, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/chennai/tamil-nadu-assembly-adopts-resolution-to-revive-sethusamudram-ship-channel-project/articleshow/96933460.cms>
6. Anish, December 2020, The ISPS Code for Ships: A Quick Guide <https://www.marineinsight.com/maritime-law/the-isps-code-for-ships-a-quick-guide/>
7. Parrikar dedicates intelligence network for coastal surveillance <https://www.deccanherald.com/content/443352/parrkar-dedicates-intelligence-network-coastal.html>
8. Raksha Mantri inaugurates Information Fusion Centre-Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), December 2022, <https://pib.gov.in/Pressreleaseshare.aspx?PRID=1557074>
9. Vijay Shakhujia, Maritime Terrorism: Karachi as staging point, October 2014 http://www.ipcs.org/comm_select.php?articleNo=4680
10. Multiple blasts at mosques inside Bangladesh Navy base, December, 2015 <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/international/world-news/multiple-blasts-at-mosques-inside-bangladesh-navy-base-6-injured/articleshow/50236339.cms?from=mdr>
11. India on alert against possible Lashkar, Jaish attacks from sea <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/india-on-alert-for-terror-attacks-from-sea/story-Z3sbBaWORD4X6R0QZqymaN.html>

12. Anjali Sharma, May 2011, Redefining Sri Lanka- Pakistan ties: An Indian Perspective <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2011/may/18/Redefining-Sri-Lanka%E2%80%93Pakistan-Ties-an-Indian-Perspective>
13. Aman Sharma and Dipanjan Roy Chaudhury, June 2014, ISI using Pakistan consulate in Colombo to target South India says arrested Lankan national <https://economictimes.indiatimes.com/news/politics-and-nation/isi-using-pakistan-consulate-in-colombo-to-target-south-india-says-arrested-lankan-national/articleshow/36405819.cms?from=mdr>
14. February, 2018, NIA to seek interpol red corner notice against Pakistan diplomat wanted in terror plot <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india-news/nia-to-seek-interpol-red-corner-notice-against-pak-diplomat-wanted-in-terror-plot/story-LPHuM3e7T8dkXKxrlxfPML.html>
15. Bharti Jain, Lashkar has fanned radicalism in Sri Lanka April 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/world/south-asia/pakistani-jihadis-rising-in-sri-lanka-india-warned/articleshow/68998049.cms>
16. Narendra Kumar, Terror strikes in Sri Lanka: Expanding footprints of jihadist movement in Indian subcontinent May 2019, <https://www.vifindia.org/article/2019/may/06/terror-strike-in-sri-lanka-expanding-footprints-of-jihadist-movement-in-the-indian-subcontinent>
17. South Asia Terrorism Portal <https://www.satp.org/terrorist-profile/india-islamistotherconflicts-andamanandnicoberislands/liberation-tigers-of-tamil-eelam-ltte>
18. ISI reviving LTTE in Tamilnadu: Report, December 2022 <https://www.aninews.in/news/world/asia/isi-trying-to-revive-ltte-in-tamil-nadu-report20221225051532/>
19. Sethu project has security issues, says coast guard, January 2008, <https://www.hindustantimes.com/india/sethu-project-has-security-issues-says-coast-guard/story-imoWWVAcvVeoD8E4k1nRwM.html>

20. Abhijit Singh, Maritime terrorism in Asia: An Assessment, October 2019, <https://www.orfonline.org/research/maritime-terrorism-in-asia-an-assessment-56581/>
21. Maritime security in the Strait of Hormuz and Sea of Oman, August 2019, <https://www.gard.no/web/updates/content/28027537/maritime-security-in-the-strait-of-hormuz-and-sea-of-oman>
22. Underwater harbour defence surveillance system, February 2017, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/underwater-harbour-defence-surveillance-system-launched-4506728/>
23. How the Thoothukudi Sterlite plant closure has affected local economy, December, 2018 <https://swarajyamag.com/economy/how-the-thoothukudi-sterlite-plant-closure-has-affected-local-economy>

SSCP- Security Challenges:

Commodore R. Seshadri Vasan

The issue, which appeared to have been shelved years ago, has made its appearance again with the demand of TN Government in the state assembly to give the necessary clearances to restart the project.

This, despite the long debate on the project which has brought out the unviability, high project costs, environmental impact/degradation, and loss of livelihood of fishers. It has been well established that there are hardly any returns on the phenomenal capital investment on dredging and revenue cost of maintaining the depths.

On the security front, there are very little plusses as would be examined in this brief.

The premise was that it would make it easy for the Eastern fleet to redeploy on the west coast for a joint operation in the North Arabian Sea in pursuit of Sea control /sea denial missions. However, the use of the SSCP would not confer any advantage in terms of time and space as the entire fleet cannot move as a cohesive battle group due to the limitations of sequenced movements in the canal. Not only would

the speed be reduced to less than eight knots, but the degree of vulnerability to random attacks, mines or other attack craft would be quite high.

It has been well established by Captain IN H Balakrishnan in his detailed report on how the SSCP does not make any “nautical sense”.

The livelihood security would also be seriously affected as the fishermen would have restricted access between the bio sensitive Gulf of Mannar and the Palk Bay. The movement of large ships would also pose navigational risks to smaller fishing vessels who would be transiting between fishing grounds. For the same reasons of reduction of speed while moving through the canal and the need for piloting large vessels, there would be minimal advantage in terms of savings on fuel and time. Also, with the increased size of merchant vessels and the high average speeds that they can maintain, there would be a reduction in the overall efficiency of the merchant fleet. The envisaged depth of 13 meters, which could be increased to 17 meters does not meet the requirement of modern vessels such as the VLCC and container vessels of ,20 meters+ draft which can carry up to 24.000 TEUs. Any additional requirement to increase the depth of the SSCP would only result in more capital expenditure on dredging and revenue expenditure on periodic maintenance dredging.

The environmental concerns are very serious as the huge volume of dredged material would need to be dumped in the deeper areas where there would be an impact on the biosphere. The Gulf of Mannar is home to some 400 exclusive species and this is a protected biosphere. The SSCP would cause immeasurable harm to the flora and fauna in the region. The risk of marine pollution is quite high due to the density of traffic.

Scientist Tad Murthy has by his analysis has clearly brought out that the deepening of the chosen canal for SSCP would take away the advantage enjoyed today in terms of a Tsunami impact. The existing topography and under water profile has ensured that the damage due to the Tsunami was contained naturally. However, with the deepening of the canal, the impact of Tsunami would be pronounced and there would be widespread damage to the coastal areas of India, Sri Lanka and Maldives.

The Coast Guard has inducted Air Cushion Vehicles (ACVs) in 2002 in Mandapam which monitors the activities in Palk Bay. The Naval Air Station in Ramanathapuram

has operated both fixed wing aircraft, UAVs and Helicopters to enhance the surveillance capability. With these mechanisms in place, the SSCP would not provide any additional security impetus in the region. The existing pattern of threats are related to Illegal Unregulated Unreported fishing (IUU), smuggling, human trafficking etc., The Navy, the Coast Guard and the Coastal Security Groups have mechanisms to monitor the areas including the shallow water patrolling enabled by the ACVs.

The Chinese Angle. China has both commercial and economic interests in the Indian Ocean Region. Though an extra regional power, it has made inroads in to India's neighborhood through the Maritime Silk Road as part of BRI and has invested heavily with eye on both strategic and economic dividends.

In addition to investments in Ports and connectivity projects with Bangladesh, Myanmar, Pakistan, Maldives and other countries in the region, China has taken over Hambantota on lease for 99 years and has complete control over the activities of that deep water port. The frequent forays of PLA units to IOR and the visit of the research vessel YW5 and YW 6 has indicated the reach and spread of China in IOR for furthering their strategic interests. The recent reports of China engaging with Sri Lankan fishers in the Northern parts for harvesting sea cucumbers does bring in a security challenge. The SSCP if commissioned would provide greater access to even the inimical powers more so in times of hostilities. The fact that Hambantota and the PLA units operating from that port would be within striking distance from the mainland and does not require the SSCP to keep the area under close monitoring to deal with emerging threats.

Overall, it's clear that the SSCP does not contribute in any manner to greater security pitch. The Government would need to stick to the same decision to give up the project. A land bridge perhaps holds more promise in terms of connectivity, trade, tourism and enhancing bilateral relations.