Lessons for Bharat (India) from China's Maritime Ecosystem

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The author is a maritime lawyer who has worked in China for several years and has visited regularly on business ever since. His hundreds of maritime clients include shipowners, charterers and cargo owners, and he has had the privilege of engaging with senior maritime and other professionals. On his most recent two-week trip, he met clients and, to strengthen those relationships, gave tens of lectures at their offices.

China is home to six of the world's ten largest container ports and ranks eighth among the top ten ports by total cargo tonnage. In shipbuilding, it accounts for 56.1% of global output and 69% of global new orders. It also hosts many of the world's shipping centers. As a derived demand, shipping is key to China's success as a leading exporter, giving it a degree of control over its exports amid shifting geopolitics, economics and trade routes.

Hard skills such as technology and process innovation undoubtedly played a key role in China's development of its maritime ecosystem. What is often overlooked, however, is the soft skill behind that success. What sets Chinese professionals apart from their counterparts in other countries, and enabled them to build such an ecosystem?

To appreciate the answer, readers should set aside geopolitics and national pride. The author believes the factors below distinguish Chinese professionals and explain their success in building a maritime ecosystem. India should reflect on them deeply:

a) A pragmatic culture leads Chinese maritime professionals to recognize the limits of their bargaining power with counterparties and to secure the best outcome available. China hired experts from other countries and paid for their services, taking the best from everywhere and giving suppliers due credit. In many other countries, by contrast, limitations are not openly acknowledged, so they either forgo overseas expertise or expect it to arrive *gratis*.

b) China carried out large projects and changes in its maritime ecosystem unobtrusively, and in some cases stealthily. In many other countries, by contrast, loud publicity is made without comparable achievements. Some marketing helps motivate change, but it should be realistic and not excessive.

c) Thanks to their ecosystem, Chinese professionals manage trillions of dollars of maritime business, spanning operations, commercial work, ship finance, shipping insurance, shipbuilding and projects, and ancillary skills. Degree-holders in other countries cannot match these practical skills, which are gained by managing vast businesses. Many countries wrongly assume that operational skill in running ships equals expertise in commercial and other areas. As a result, senior professionals with an operational background, serving in senior administrative positions or on committees, often cannot see the skills gaps.

d) The author observes that, although Chinese professionals are major players in global maritime business, they usually listen and learn at conferences, lectures and other professional settings rather than showcase their own skills. They learn humbly from everyone without projecting their knowledge or experience, and this has not changed over two decades of growth. In many other countries, by contrast, armchair professionals offer unsolicited and immodest advice to the world, unaware that their experience in the commercial side of maritime business is small even compared with that of 20-year-olds in China. Bringing about change and closing the skills gap requires realism and respect for the strengths of maritime professionals in other countries.

e) China's maritime ecosystem rests on robust maritime education. For example, even students of commercial shipping spend a few days on merchant ships. The commercial side of shipping is as important as the technical side.

f) Chinese senior managers have experience running their own fleets, covering shipping finance, commercial operations and technical operations. The author also visits second- and third-tier cities, where his clients own 20 to 40 merchant ships each, comparable to national fleet of many countries. This experience differs from learning operations on ships owned by European owners. It sits at the top tier of maritime skills, above operational and technical skills, which are important but not equivalent. Countries trying to emulate China's success should therefore avoid staffing committees with people whose expertise is limited to operations. They should recognise which skills are truly required, assess their own strengths realistically, and remain humble about the skill gap.

g) Two decades ago, China allowed maritime law firms, P&I Clubs and marine insurers to open offices in the country, which enabled young local professionals to learn their skills. This did not mean foreign players operated without limits. It showed that policymakers were confident in their country's strength.

The author shares these observations for the benefit of the Indian maritime industry, drawing on his own experience rather than any policy expertise. Readers are encouraged to treat them objectively and not as criticism.




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