



India introduces new requirements for ships in coastal waters

Foreign ships calling at Indian ports, operating in Indian coastal waters or transiting those waters may fall within an expanded regulatory regime. A transition period applies to specified additional requirements until 1 April 2027.

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At a glance

- The 2026 Rules came into force on 16 September 2026 and replace the previous 2012 port-entry rules.
- Their scope extends beyond port calls and may include foreign ships transiting or operating within Indian coastal waters.
- Additional requirements include evidence of valid salvage and marine pollution response contracts, and class certificates for certain older vessels.
- DGMA Circular No. 69 of 2026 provides a transition period until 1 April 2027 for the additional classification and response-contract requirements.

Expanded scope of the 2026 Rules

India notified the Merchant Shipping (Regulation of Entry of Ships into Coastal Waters) Rules, 2026 on 16 September 2026. The Rules supersede the Merchant Shipping (Regulation of Entry of Ships into Ports, Anchorages and Offshore Facilities) Rules, 2012. The new regime applies to Indian ships and to foreign ships that operate in or navigate through Indian coastal waters, whether or not they enter an Indian port, anchorage or offshore facility. The absence of an Indian port call therefore does not necessarily place a foreign ship outside the scope of the Rules.

What is meant by “coastal waters”?

The 2026 Rules refer to the definition in the Merchant Shipping Act, 2025. Under section 3(12):

- “Coastal waters” means any part of territorial waters of India, along with any part of the adjoining maritime zones of India within the meaning of the Territorial Waters, Continental Shelf, Exclusive Economic Zone and Other Maritime Zones Act, 1976 (80 of 1976), or any other law for time being in force;
- It covers India's territorial sea and adjoining maritime zones, including areas beyond the territorial sea where India has rights or jurisdiction under the relevant laws.

Key requirements

Insurance and financial security Foreign ships within the scope of the Rules must maintain the applicable insurance or other financial security required under the Merchant Shipping Act, 2025 and the relevant rules. For ships calling at an Indian port, the port authority may verify the validity of the cover.

Evidence of class A foreign ship exceeding the applicable age threshold must hold a valid certificate of class issued by an International Association of Classification Societies (IACS) member or a recognised organisation. The thresholds highlighted in the available industry guidance are:

- Oil product and chemical tankers: over 10 years.
- LNG and LPG tankers: over 15 years.
- General cargo ships, bulk carriers, offshore support ships, passenger ships and other specified ship types: generally over 10 years.

Salvage and marine pollution response contracts Foreign ships entering, remaining in or sailing from an Indian port, seeking port facilities, or transiting or operating within Indian coastal waters are required to maintain valid salvage and marine pollution response contracts with an entity approved under the applicable Indian legislation. The purpose is to ensure that response support is available in the event of a casualty, pollution incident or other emergency.

Port calls and transits: an important distinction

The new Rules apply not only to ships calling at Indian ports, anchorages or offshore facilities, but also to ships operating in or navigating through Indian coastal waters. As a result, a foreign ship may still fall within the scope of the Rules even if it is only transiting Indian coastal waters and has no intention of calling at an Indian port.

For ships calling at an Indian port, the requirements may include applicable insurance or financial security, evidence of class, and salvage and marine pollution response arrangements. These ships must also comply with the port-entry documentation requirements, including submission of the prescribed documents at least 48 hours before entering the port.

Ships that are only transiting or operating in Indian coastal waters may still be subject to the requirements relating to insurance or financial security, class, and salvage and marine pollution response arrangements. However, the 48-hour documentation requirement may not apply to such vessels.

Transition period until April 2027

The Directorate General of Maritime Administration issued Circular No. 69 of 2026 on 14 October 2026. The Circular explains that the process of approving salvors and marine pollution response operators is still underway and that the relevant contract requirement cannot be fully implemented until approved providers have been notified.

To allow an orderly transition, ships already operating in, or otherwise permitted entry into, Indian coastal waters have been given six months, up to April 2027, to comply with the additional requirements introduced by the 2026 Rules. By that date, owners and operators are expected to comply with the revised classification requirements and maintain the required salvage and marine pollution response contracts.

Further guidance expected

At the time of writing, the empanelment of approved salvors and marine pollution response operators remains in progress. Further clarification is also expected on contracting arrangements. Owners and operators should continue to monitor official DGMA updates and obtain voyage-specific advice from their local agents where necessary.

Special thanks to our correspondent, James Mackintosh & Co. Pvt. Ltd., for their assistance in clarifying the scope and implementation of the new requirements.

Sources

- [The Merchant Shipping \(Regulation of Entry of Ships into Coastal Waters\) Rules, 2026 \(Note: English text begins from page 17\)](#)
- [Directorate General of Maritime Administration, Circular No. 69 of 2026, dated 14 October 2026](#)
- [Merchant Shipping Act 2025 \(24 of 2025\)](#)

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