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? UN Sea-Level Rise Declaration Secures Statehood Continuity and Highlights India's Coastal Adaptation Challenges

Published On: 05-10-2026

Recent Developments:

- On **24 September 2026**, the **UN General Assembly** adopted its first **Political Declaration on Sea-Level Rise**, following a high-level meeting at UN Headquarters in New York. The declaration addresses the legal, economic, humanitarian and environmental consequences of rising seas.
- The declaration recognises that **sea-level rise is accelerating** and calls for science, data and projections to be integrated into coastal planning, infrastructure development, adaptation and resilience strategies.
- It provides important legal-political recognition for **continued statehood, sovereignty, sovereign rights and UN membership** despite physical changes caused by sea-level rise. It also supports the stability of maritime zones established under the **United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS)**.

Scale and Scientific Basis of Sea-Level Rise:

Observed Trends:

- The **World Meteorological Organization (WMO)** reports that the rate of global mean sea-level rise increased from **2.1 mm per year during 1993–2002** to **4.7 mm per year during 2015–2024**, more than doubling within three decades.
- **2024 recorded the highest global mean sea level since satellite observations began in 1993**, demonstrating the increasing urgency of coastal adaptation.
- Sea-level rise results mainly from **thermal expansion of seawater and melting of glaciers and ice sheets**, while its impacts are amplified by coastal subsidence, erosion, storm surges and saltwater intrusion.

Long-Term Implications:

- Even under strong mitigation, sea levels will continue rising for **centuries to millennia** because of the long response time of oceans and ice sheets.
- Major consequences include **coastal flooding, shoreline erosion, salinisation of groundwater and agricultural land, damage to infrastructure, ecosystem loss and population displacement**.
- **Small Island Developing States (SIDS)** face particularly severe risks because limited land area, low elevation and concentrated populations make physical retreat difficult.

Legal Significance of the UN Declaration:

Continuity of Statehood:

- Traditional international-law criteria associated with the **1933 Montevideo Convention** identify four elements of statehood: **permanent population, defined territory, government, and capacity to enter relations with other states**.

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- Sea-level rise creates a legal problem because permanent inundation or severe habitability loss could undermine the territorial element of statehood.
- The 2026 declaration supports a **presumption in favour of continued statehood**, recognising continuity of sovereignty, sovereign rights and UN membership despite physical changes caused by sea-level rise.
- The declaration is a **political declaration rather than a new treaty**, so its importance lies in strengthening international consensus and legal certainty rather than independently creating a new treaty-based regime.

Stability of Maritime Zones:

- The declaration supports the position that maritime zones established consistently with UNCLOS can remain stable despite subsequent physical changes caused by sea-level rise.
- The principle is particularly significant for **territorial seas, exclusive economic zones and other maritime entitlements**, because loss or movement of coastlines could otherwise create uncertainty over maritime boundaries and resource rights.
- A country's **territorial sea extends up to 12 nautical miles**, while its **Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ) can extend up to 200 nautical miles**, subject to UNCLOS provisions.
- Stable maritime zones are important for **fisheries, offshore energy, seabed resources, navigation and strategic security**.

Humanitarian and Climate Dimensions:

Displacement and Human Rights:

- Sea-level rise can create **slow-onset displacement**, which differs from sudden displacement caused by cyclones, floods or other disasters.
- The declaration emphasises **human rights, livelihoods, culture and heritage**, while supporting voluntary choices and “**mobility with dignity**” for affected populations.
- Climate-induced mobility therefore requires not only relocation sites but also **land security, livelihood restoration, social protection, cultural continuity and access to basic services**.

Climate Mitigation and Adaptation:

- **Mitigation** addresses the root cause by reducing greenhouse-gas emissions, while **adaptation** reduces vulnerability to unavoidable climate impacts.
- Sea-level rise demonstrates why both approaches are necessary because even successful long-term mitigation cannot immediately stop ocean and ice-sheet responses.
- The issue also reinforces the principle of **Common but Differentiated Responsibilities and Respective Capabilities (CBDR-RC)** in international climate negotiations.

India's Strategic and Coastal Stakes:

India's Maritime Interests:

- India's officially reassessed coastline is **11,098.81 km**, including island territories, based on updated high-water-line surveys and modern GIS methods.
- **Lakshadweep and the Andaman and Nicobar Islands** extend India's maritime interests into the Arabian Sea and Bay of Bengal.
- Stability of maritime zones therefore protects India's interests in **EEZ resources, fisheries, offshore infrastructure, energy security and maritime security**.

Coastal Erosion:

- India faces a combined challenge of **sea-level rise and shoreline change** rather than sea-level rise alone.

- Research on India highlights substantial coastal vulnerability, including risks to **fisheries, agriculture, settlements, infrastructure and livelihoods**. A 2025 review estimates that around **45 million Indians could be at risk from sea-level rise by 2050**, while also emphasising the need for more coherent adaptation governance.
- **Ghoramara Island in West Bengal** illustrates the human dimension of coastal erosion; research records a decline in its area from about **7.23 sq km in 1972 to 3.60 sq km in 2022**.

India's Coastal Regulation Framework:

Coastal Regulation Zone Notification, 2019:

- The **CRZ Notification, 2019** regulates development along coastal stretches to conserve ecosystems and protect coastal communities and livelihoods.
- In **CRZ-III A**, densely populated relatively undisturbed areas with population density above **2,161 persons per sq km** have a **50-metre No Development Zone (NDZ)** from the High Tide Line after approval of the Coastal Zone Management Plan.
- In **CRZ-III B**, the NDZ extends **200 metres from the High Tide Line**.
- The **High Tide Line (HTL)** is therefore central to coastal regulation, while a changing shoreline creates difficulties when static regulatory distances are applied to dynamically changing coastal conditions.

Hazard Line and Adaptation Gap:

- The **Survey of India hazard line** incorporates flooding, sea-level rise and shoreline changes and has been shared with coastal States and Union Territories.
- Under the 2019 framework, the hazard line primarily functions as a **disaster-management and adaptive-planning tool**, while regulatory boundaries continue to rely on specified coastal reference lines.
- This creates a policy challenge because **future climate risk may extend beyond present-day regulatory boundaries**, particularly on rapidly eroding coastlines.

Key Challenges for India:

Governance and Legal Gaps:

- India lacks a single comprehensive legal framework specifically governing **slow-onset climate displacement caused by coastal erosion and sea-level rise**.
- Adaptation responsibilities are distributed across **environmental regulation, disaster management, coastal-zone planning, fisheries, water management and State-level institutions**, creating coordination challenges.
- A 2025 review identifies fragmented governance and the absence of a coherent framework integrating adaptation measures as major concerns.

Adaptation Finance:

- UNEP estimates that developing countries may require **US\$310–365 billion annually by 2035** for adaptation, while international public adaptation finance was only **US\$26 billion in 2023**.
- At **COP29 in Baku**, India criticised the **US\$300 billion annual climate-finance mobilisation goal by 2035** as inadequate relative to developing-country needs and stressed equity and CBDR-RC.

Way Forward for India:

Climate-Resilient Coastal Planning:

- Integrate **projected sea-level rise, erosion rates, storm-surge risk and coastal subsidence** into infrastructure planning rather than relying only on historical shoreline positions.

- Strengthen **dynamic Coastal Zone Management Plans** using satellite imagery, GIS, tide-gauge observations and updated hazard assessments.
- Prioritise **nature-based solutions**, including mangrove restoration, wetlands, dunes and coastal ecosystems, alongside scientifically justified hard infrastructure.

Planned Relocation and Social Protection:

- Develop a dedicated framework for **slow-onset displacement**, with advance risk mapping and transparent relocation criteria.
- Ensure affected households receive **secure land tenure, livelihood restoration, housing, social protection and access to public services**.
- Protect **cultural heritage and community networks**, particularly in island and indigenous coastal communities.

International Cooperation:

- Continue supporting **SIDS and vulnerable coastal developing countries** through climate finance, technology transfer, capacity building and scientific cooperation.
- Link sea-level-rise diplomacy with **UNCLOS, UNFCCC, Paris Agreement, Sendai Framework and Sustainable Development Goal 13**.
- Use the next high-level UN review of sea-level rise scheduled for **2030** to push for stronger implementation, finance and adaptation commitments.

Value Addition for UPSC:

Key Concepts:

- **Sea-Level Rise:** Long-term increase in the average level of the global ocean.
- **Coastal Erosion:** Removal of coastal material by waves, currents, storms and other processes, often intensified by human interventions and sea-level rise.
- **Climate Displacement:** Movement of people resulting from climate-related environmental pressures, including gradual coastal inundation.
- **Hazard Line:** A mapped line incorporating flooding, sea-level rise and shoreline changes for coastal disaster-management and adaptation planning.
- **UNCLOS:** International legal framework governing maritime zones, navigation and ocean resources.
- **SIDS:** Small Island Developing States that face disproportionate climate and sea-level-rise vulnerabilities despite generally low historical emissions.

UPSC Linkages:

- **GS-I:** Geography — coastal processes, sea-level rise, erosion, islands and climate-induced migration.
- **GS-II:** International relations — UNCLOS, SIDS, climate diplomacy, international law and maritime zones.
- **GS-III:** Environment — climate change, adaptation, disaster management, coastal regulation and climate finance.
- **Essay:** Climate change as a challenge to **territory, sovereignty, livelihoods and human security**.
- **SDGs:** **SDG 13 — Climate Action** and **SDG 14 — Life Below Water**.
- **Core takeaway:** Sea-level rise is no longer only an environmental problem; it simultaneously raises questions of **international law, statehood, maritime rights, coastal governance, displacement and climate finance**.