

Improving Indo-Pacific Maritime Governance: Innovations from YCAPS-La Trobe Asia Maritime GENIE Program



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FRONT MATTER

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The Indo-Pacific Maritime Governance Expanded Network for Innovation and Education (GENIE) program sought to create a cadre of emerging leaders for advancing regional maritime governance. YCAPS and La Trobe Asia co-designed a series of tailored online professional development workshops aimed at developing skillsets and fostering innovation maturity. These training events were complemented by in-person workshops in Jakarta and Sydney. Through the program's curriculum, senior policy experts mentored participants from Australia and Southeast Asia and helped them develop their ideas into policy recommendations for the Australian government.

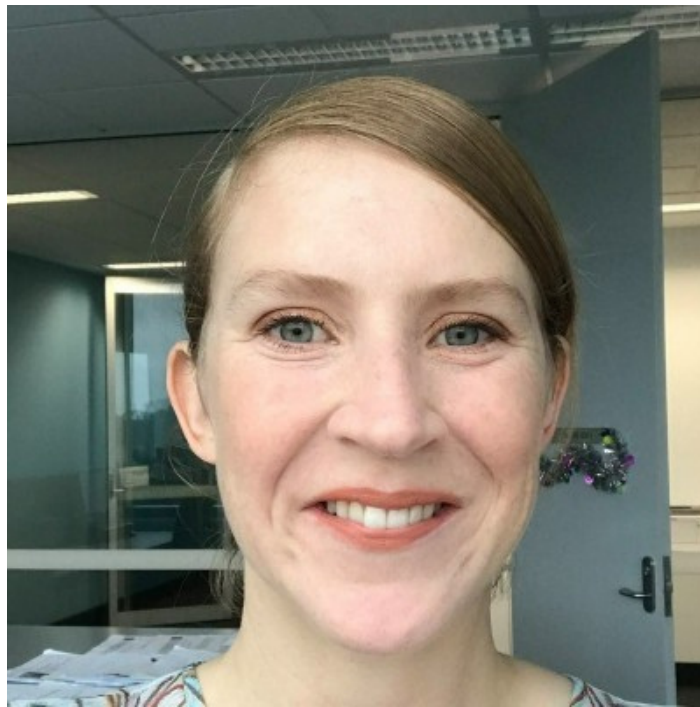
Five emerging scholars from four countries were selected for the Maritime GENIE inaugural cohort. The cohort includes the following individuals:

Edward Chan (Australia)



Edward Sing Yue Chan is a scholar, researcher, and policy analyst specialising in China's maritime security. He is a Postdoctoral Fellow from the Australian Centre on China in the World, the Australian National University. With expertise in international relations, Indo-Pacific security, China's foreign policy, and maritime security, his current research focuses on China's evolving influence in ocean governance. He is the author of *China's Maritime Security Strategy: The Evolution of a Growing Sea Power* (Routledge, 2021). Edward is also the Associate Editor of *The China Journal*.

Genevieve Quirk (Australia)



Genevieve Quirk BSc (UQ), DULF(UParisIII–Sorbonne), MEnvLaw (ANU), PhD (UOW) is a Researcher/Lecturer at the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources and Security. Her PhD in International Law and International Relations explored the evolution of regional ocean governance and diplomacy by Pacific States over 75 years. Dr Quirk’s research examines the governance architecture implementing the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, focusing on the ecological security of the Indo-Pacific. Dr Quirk’s publications are frequently cited in UN, regional agency and national government reports. Genevieve is on the editorial board of the journal *Marine Policy*, an East West Centre Visiting Fellow, an Earth System Governance Research Fellow, and a member of the IUCN World Commission on Environmental Law. Dr Quirk joined the Australian delegation to the UN in relation to SDG14 and the Biodiversity Beyond National Jurisdiction Treaty. In Brussels, Dr Quirk worked as a Policy Advisor on ocean governance reform in the EU. Previously, she held the position of Lecturer at the University of Paris II–Panthéon-Assas for three years, while also consulting for UNESCO.

Jeslyn Tan (Malaysia)



Jeslyn Tan is a Senior Program Manager for maritime initiatives at the Australian High Commission in Malaysia. Previously, she was a Researcher at the Centre of Maritime Security and Diplomacy at the Maritime Institute of Malaysia (MIMA). Her main research interests include ASEAN-major power relations, Indo-Pacific geopolitics, regional multilateralism, and maritime security in Southeast Asia. She is also a participant in the Indo-Pacific Maritime GENIE (Governance Expanded Network for Innovation and Education) Program funded by the Australian Government and a Young Leader of the Pacific Forum. Furthermore, she was a Security Research Fellow in the EU-funded EU-ASEAN Think Tank Dialogue (EANGAGE) Project.

Lupita Wijaya (Indonesia)



Lupita Wijaya is a teaching associate and module expert in Data Analytics Fundamentals at Monash University and has been teaching at the University of Melbourne since 2020. She holds a doctoral degree in Media Studies & Communications from Monash University and has extensive teaching and research experience in mediatised conflict and geopolitical security in the South China Sea, with an emphasis on exploratory quantitative approaches and data analytics. She completed her undergraduate degree in Indonesia and her master's degree in Taiwan. Her research has been published in various journals and platforms, including Asian Politics & Policy, The Indonesian Quarterly, and Strategic Review, as well as widely-read media outlets such as The Conversation and The Jakarta Post. Actively teaching and publishing since 2016, her latest publication, "What's in a Name? Imagined Territories and Sea Names in the South China Sea Conflict," was featured in the leading journal, the International Journal of Communication, in 2023.

Linh Nguyen (Vietnam)



Linh T Nguyen is a Ph.D. Scholar at the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre (SDSC), Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs, the Australian National University. Her research is funded by the Australian Government Research Training Program (AGRTP). Linh is also a Research Fellow at the East Sea Institute, the Diplomatic Academy, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Vietnam since 2018. Her research interests include Vietnam's foreign policy, China-US relationship, maritime security, and the South China Sea. She earned a Master of International Public Policy with Distinction from University College London (UCL), where she was awarded a Chevening Scholarship from the UK government. Linh also held diplomas from the International Foundation for the Law of the Sea (IFLOS) in Germany and the University of Wollongong in Australia. Previously, she was a research assistant at the Henry Jackson Society, a London-based think tank.

GENIES' Policy Innovations:

Cohort Resultant Report Summary

By Ian Kennedy

The participants in the first cohort of the Maritime GENIE program, sponsored by a program jointly executed by La Trobe Asia and the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies (YCAPS) and individually referred to as 'Genies', generated and refined innovative ideas to improve Indo-Pacific maritime governance. Those ideas were presented directly to government officials and leaders in other stakeholder organizations. Each Genie also documented their innovation in a short analytical paper published by Australian Outlook. The recommendations ranged from continuing Australia's longstanding commitment to multilateralism to improving the utilization of technology to achieve foreign policy objectives. Taken together, the cohort's insights demonstrate the success of the Maritime GENIE's inaugural cohort and set the stage for further productive contributions from the region's emerging scholars in the future.

Dr. Edward Chan argues that Australia should focus on shared maritime interests with China in the context of maritime security and ocean governance. He asserts that, while security-related cooperation between the two nations will be challenging, China and Australia's interests align in several other areas, including maritime issues, climate change, and disaster management. Chan believes this approach to relations with China will pay dividends in a region hesitant to choose between the U.S. and China. Ultimately, Chan recommends a *realpolitik* approach to a rapprochement between China and other countries on non-security issues related to maritime governance.

Dr. Genevieve Quirk highlights what she believes is the maritime domain's greatest challenge: climate change. Quirk argues that Australia, as a member of the High-Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, must take on a leadership role in addressing climate change effects on the world's oceans. She focuses on three existing UN coordination mechanisms: UN-Oceans, the Regional Fishery Body Secretariats' Network (RSN), the Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI), and UNESCO's Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission. Quirk asserts that Australia should invest in these mechanisms and work to strengthen its institutional capacity. She contends that Australia's commitment to existing UN coordination mechanisms can contribute to ecological security for a more sustainable and secure Indo-Pacific region.

Linh Nguyen proposes the development of a Maritime Domain Awareness mobile app to address information gaps and limited regional cooperation on maritime governance issues. Nguyen argues that this app would allow policymakers in the region to make more informed decisions and respond more swiftly, enabled by the app's real-time insights rather than relying solely on secondary sources. She believes that Australia could be a key partner in the development of this app due to the country's technical, financial, and human resources. She points to Australia's experience in fostering multilateral information-sharing agreements between agencies in the South Pacific as evidence of Australia's expertise.

Like Linh, Lupita Wijaya underscores information gaps on issues of maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific. Wijaya identifies several cases of misreporting that have led to public misunderstandings, policy missteps, and the development of uninformed regulations. To overcome issues in maritime media literacy, Wijaya proposes the development of a media fellowship program focused on maritime reporting and literacy that offers field-specific training workshops, as well as partnerships with diverse experts, scholars, and government officials from Australia and Southeast Asia countries. She argues that Australia's strong tradition of press freedom and independent journalism, existing Australia-ASEAN media engagement initiatives, and the importance of sustained engagement between ASEAN and Australia position Australia well to develop this fellowship.

Jeslyn Tan proposes another technological project that countries, such as Australia, can support in expanding their partnerships and integration with ASEAN members: a common maritime database. Tan's proposed database would offer empirical support for trend analysis, inform policy decisions, and improve response strategies for future challenges. Besides functioning as a maritime data repository, the common marine database can also help enhance trust between different stakeholders in the Indo-Pacific region, furthering one of Australia's chief foreign policy goals: regional stability.

The GENIE cohort comprised specialists from diverse backgrounds and countries. This diversity is reflected in their range of recommendations, with some focusing on enhancing multilateral and bilateral cooperation with organizations and countries in the Indo-Pacific region. While some were quite policy-focused, others developed innovative technology project proposals to address the region's most pressing maritime governance challenges. However, all cohort members outlined concrete steps for the Australian Government or other organizations to implement the proposed policies, initiatives, and projects. The Genies demonstrated their expertise on maritime governance issues facing the Indo-Pacific region and identified innovative solutions Australia can utilize in its foreign policy.

Craft a Maritime Domain Awareness Mobile Application for Resilient Maritime Governance in the Indo-Pacific

By Linh T. Nguyen

The Indo-Pacific faces significant maritime challenges, and the solutions to that problem are undermined by insufficient maritime domain awareness (MDA) and fragmented international cooperation. A “Maritime Domain Awareness Mobile Application” featuring an open-source, user-friendly design with interactive functionalities could help address both shortfalls. The app would improve policymakers’ access to maritime information while fostering trust and regional collaboration, starting with a pilot program built by Vietnam.

The Indo-Pacific is a hotspot for maritime governance challenges, including natural disasters, piracy, trafficking, illegal, unreported, unregulated (IUU) fishing, and territorial disputes. Finding and implementing policies to address those challenges is made more difficult due to limitations on the MDA available and fragmented international cooperation.

Developing a Maritime Domain Awareness Mobile App could be a practical policy solution tailored for policymakers to address these gaps. The envisioned MDA app would function similarly to user-friendly platforms like the BBC or CNN, making maritime information available as easily as social media updates. By using real-time updates, curated summaries, and a push-notification system, the app will allow policymakers to overcome time constraints and overly technical reports to absorb timely maritime information.

Instead of classifying data sharing and restricting its availability to selected users, the app could integrate open-source and publicly available information to enhance transparency and mitigate trust concerns. By leveraging user-friendly design, the app could simplify technical requirements and accommodate varying levels of technical infrastructure. Vietnam can launch this app as a pilot program and a regional public good with support from Australia. Subsequently, Vietnam can introduce the app to ASEAN, allowing other member states to assess its feasibility and consider replication.

Problems Originate with a Lack of Information and Fragmented Data Distribution

The need for this app arises from two sources. At the national level, policymakers tend to have a limited understanding of developments at sea. The fragmented, technical, and user-unfriendly nature of existing mechanisms and resources hinders their effective access and absorption of critical information. At the regional level, a lack of information sharing and coordination among ASEAN member states — primarily driven by national security sensitivities — further impedes progress. Without a clear maritime picture, miscommunication or delayed responses can escalate tensions and further contribute to maritime insecurity across the Indo-Pacific.

While ASEAN countries receive support from more developed countries to enhance their MDA capacity, the digital and human infrastructure provided by external partners may be incompatible with ASEAN systems. Several ASEAN members also face barriers such as limited language skills, technical expertise, and institutional commitment to fully utilize international support. In addition, concerns over data leaks and the impact of strategic competition have made them hesitant to accept international initiatives. For instance, Vietnam's decision to decline participation in the EU's CRIMARIO (Critical Maritime Routes Indo-Pacific) project was likely driven by such concerns.

Against this backdrop, the MDA mobile app is expected to bridge gaps in technical and political trust. Like most good policy innovations, this one came to claim many parents. I came to the concept independently, but in the process of developing the idea I discovered others had similar ideas. James Kraska of the US Naval War College suggested creating a website to upload information on maritime incidents and to report illegal activities in the South China Sea. Alex Min's proposal, "Maritime Domain Reporting Software", enabled the maritime community to communicate all sorts of peculiarities and users to collaborate toward solutions. He described this idea as the NextDoor, a neighbourhood cooperation platform for reporting illegal activities in the region. Along the lines of these ideas, the MDA app should start with non-sensitive and public data to engage and build confidence incrementally among ASEAN countries, paving the way for deeper collaboration in the future. The app empowers policymakers to make informed decisions and respond swiftly, relying on real-time insights from the app rather than solely on secondary sources. By providing comprehensive coverage of various maritime areas, the app can serve as the "eyes and ears" for policymakers at sea.

Proposed Features of the MDA Mobile App

Inputs — the app would compile and rearrange data and information from various sources, such as Singapore's Information Fusion Centre (IFC), India's Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region (IFC-IOR), the Asia Maritime Transparency

Initiative (AMTI), media reports, and relevant published papers and academic journals. These centres and sources already provide rich MDA data and maintain a maritime situational picture for the region. The app could then collect and consolidate relevant information from these sources to present an up-to-date, user-friendly maritime awareness platform.

Outputs — the app could offer real-time alerts, data visualisation, a push-notification system, and simplified summaries to ensure usability for busy policymakers of ASEAN member states. It could present key developments undersea, at sea, and above sea level in the Indo-Pacific region. Specific features might include: updates on natural disasters, pollution, and sea level rise, with assessments of severity; identification of critical areas for IUU fishing, piracy, and trafficking; monitoring of vulnerable submarine cable zones; and real-time tracking of incidents, regional competition, and confrontations.

Interactive features — the app could include a discussion forum or group chat for policymakers to exchange analyses and share information anytime, anywhere without much effort. Contributions from experts and scholars through a separate, unofficial channel within the app could be encouraged to enrich the its database through a “see something, say something” mechanism, for instance. These features would make the app dynamic, fostering collaboration while maintaining accessibility and ease of use.

Vietnam as the Driving Force and Role of Australia and Other Partners

Vietnam should take the lead in coordinating and developing the app, aligning with its ambition to enhance digital connectivity with other ASEAN countries. Leveraging the MDA app for maritime coordination could be a practical initiative and a meaningful contribution from Vietnam to regional connectivity. Vietnam could introduce a small-scale, low-risk pilot project to assess its feasibility and to fine-tune the app’s technical and practical aspects. ASEAN countries then can be included in the app’s development to ensure it reflects collective interests and concerns. The app should be rolled out in phases, starting with non-sensitive data, and gradually introducing more complex features as trust grows. The proposal aligns with the region’s broader goals of improving maritime governance while respecting national sovereignty.

Australia could be a key partner to support Vietnam thanks to its technical, financial, and human resources. In addition, Australia’s experience in the South Pacific, particularly in fostering multilateral information-sharing agreements between agencies (e.g., law enforcement, fisheries, customs) could also help design the app. Viewing MDA as a public good to enhance maritime governance aligns with Australia’s national interests, making the initiative attractive to

Australian policymakers.

Other partners and mechanisms, such as the US, India, the QUAD, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), could also contribute by offering advice, technical assistance, funding, and capacity-building to enhance the app's functionality and data accuracy. Current MDA support to the region from these partners, such as SEAVISION (a web-based maritime situational awareness tool developed by the US) and IPMDA (Indo-Pacific Partnership for Maritime Domain Awareness) provides a strong foundation for this suggestion.

The proposed MDA app would not only enhance the maritime awareness capabilities of ASEAN leaders, but also catalyse deeper regional cooperation in maritime governance with support from Australia and other external partners. Over time, this initial effort could pave the way for more sophisticated MDA tools, contributing to a peaceful, secure, and prosperous Indo-Pacific.

Let's Focus on What Australia and China Can Agree on in Maritime Security

By Dr. Edward Chan

Since taking office in 2022, the Albanese government has stabilised Australia-China relations, with Prime Minister Anthony Albanese holding his third formal meeting with Xi Jinping at the G20 Summit. According to the post-summit media readout, both states reiterated their commitment to bilateral dialogue. They acknowledged the importance of building understanding on mutual issues, navigating differences wisely, and expanding areas of cooperation.

Australia's approach to China remains clear: cooperate with China where we can, disagree where we must, and engage in the national interests. Over the past year, while Canberra has signalled interest in collaborating with Beijing on matters beyond economic trade, such as climate change, energy transition, and ministerial exchanges, it has been drawing firm lines regarding its differences from Beijing on regional security and avoiding opportunities to negotiate with China on security-related matters.

In the specific context of maritime security and ocean governance, Canberra has been cautious in engaging China. This has largely stemmed from concerns over Beijing's assertive actions, such as the interception of Australian aircraft in the South China Sea, the use of sonar in the vicinity of the Australian naval divers and the collision with the Philippines' coast guard ships. The 2024 Lowy Institute poll found that 71% of Australians continue to think that China is "somewhat likely" or "very likely" to become a military threat to Australia in the next 20 years. This perception is likely driven by China's activities in the maritime domain, particularly in the South China Sea and around Taiwan. Consequently, Australian governments are hesitant to engage too closely with China on maritime security issues.

This wariness is shared by Australian experts, who cite fundamental differences between Canberra and Beijing on the notion of regional stability and strategic goals. Even Chinese scholars acknowledge these divergences, recognising the difficulty of forging security-related cooperation.

It is appropriate for Australia to exchange our views on geopolitics and highlight our differences with China. However, while national security concerns dominate the narrative, they should not overshadow opportunities for collaboration in ocean governance, an area with significant common ground. Addressing the

enforcement of laws, regulations, and policies in our surrounding maritime domain should extend beyond maritime disputes and national defence. Pressing regional challenges such as environmental sustainability, transnational crime, sea lane safety, and climate change make cooperation in these areas more necessary. The Australian government has been consistent on its approach to maritime security. For example, during the Australia-China Defence Coordination Dialogue in October 2024, Australia did not highlight the concern of territorial disputes. Rather, it emphasised “the importance of adherence to international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea,” as well as “all countries acting in a manner that respects sovereignty and upholds regional peace and stability.”

These principles, at least diplomatically, would be largely agreed with by China. They do not necessarily have to focus on maritime disputes, but also on non-conventional security issues, which may open some rooms for engagement between Australia and China.

Still, critics often argue that it is difficult to work with China because it is an unreliable partner — highlighting the ambiguity and inconsistency in China’s approach — as well as the gap between its diplomatic rhetoric and its actions. While concerns over China’s activities are valid, Australia cannot afford to fixate solely on these discrepancies. Instead, it must address a wider range of pressing ocean governance issues that often fly under the radar.

First, maritime governance requires extensive multilateral efforts. Despite differing interests, political systems, and strategic priorities, many countries in the region remain open to working with China on shared maritime challenges. For instance, the China-Southeast Asian Countries Marine Cooperation Forum demonstrates how track-1.5 dialogues can facilitate discussions on non-contentious maritime issues, bypassing territorial disputes.

Second, urgent issues such as climate change, disaster management, and illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing, demand greater attention. These challenges are particularly critical for countries in Southeast Asia and the South Pacific, affecting them alongside Australia and China. These challenges are less politically sensitive than strategic concerns, which enhances the prospects of cooperation on them.

While Australia has already built strong collaboration with Southeast Asian countries on non-traditional maritime issues, excluding China from these efforts may limit their potential impacts. In fact, Australia has an ongoing dialogue with China on climate change. Greater transparency and clarity are needed to build trust and set a positive tone for bilateral relations. Australia should be more

proactive and inclusive in such a dialogue through the promotion of good governance — including responsible resource management — environmental protection, and adherence to international laws.

Focusing on security cooperation with China may not significantly impact Australia's national security directly, but it enhances Australia's role as a regional maritime state. Many countries in the region are weary of every issue through the lens of national security and are hesitant to choose sides between the US and China. For them, ocean governance should transcend great power politics and be treated as a shared responsibility for common goods. To garner regional support, Australia would benefit from de-emphasising China's threat or framing China's involvement in ocean governance as part of a broader effort to reshape the regional order. This approach aligns with Australia's national interests while avoiding perceived inconsistencies or exclusivity.

Critics might argue that, as an asymmetric player, it is risky for Australia to engage with China as an untrusted security partner. However, if Australia is genuinely concerned about China's ambitions to reshape the maritime order and aims to play a more proactive role in coordinating regional security concerns, direct engagement with China is essential, given its status as the largest country in the region.

More importantly, it is becoming increasingly difficult to avoid discussions about deeper security cooperation within one of Australia's most significant bilateral relationships. From China's perspective, there is a preference for Australia to emphasise areas of cooperation rather than differences. As bilateral relations improve, Australia can gain a clearer understanding of China's interests while effectively articulating its own priorities for the maritime order. Clarifying shared policy areas and identifying pathways for cooperative governance in the maritime domain are critical steps toward achieving a desirable outcome.

Ocean governance is far too important to be sidelined by geopolitical rivalries. By focusing on shared maritime interests, Australia can reinforce its role as a regional leader, foster cooperation with China, and build a more inclusive framework for ocean governance.

It is time for Canberra to lead by example — by engaging China where interests align, championing collective efforts for ocean sustainability, and ultimately fostering a more constructive Australia-China relationship.

Australia Can Lead on Ecological Security of the Indo-Pacific Ocean

By Dr. Genevieve Quirk

By investing in key UN institutional mechanisms, Australia can contribute to upholding the rules-based order of the law of the sea and enhancing the ecological security of our oceans, leading to a more sustainable and secure Indo-Pacific region.

The Indo-Pacific faces significant maritime challenges, and the solutions to that problem are undermined by insufficient maritime domain awareness (MDA) and fragmented international cooperation. A “Maritime Domain Awareness Mobile Application” featuring an open-source, user-friendly design with interactive functionalities could help address both shortfalls. The app would improve policymakers’ access to maritime information while fostering trust and regional collaboration, starting with a pilot program built by Vietnam.

Ecological security is vital to a peaceful and stable Indo-Pacific Ocean. Climate change, through the triple threat of ocean warming, acidification and deoxygenation, adversely impacts the marine ecosystems that underpin the security of the Indo-Pacific Ocean. The transformation of the ocean system requires a corresponding transformation in the implementation of the global constitution for the oceans — the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). When UNCLOS was negotiated in the 1970s, however, the ocean impacts of climate change were largely unknown to the scientific community. This analysis examines how investment in key coordination mechanisms of the UNCLOS architecture can improve ecological security.

The new High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy comprising 19 countries including Australia, France, Indonesia and Japan, can lead transformative governance for our ocean. Australia must reverse its poor performance in reducing carbon emissions and weak efforts on sustainability under the Sustainable Ocean Plan. All members of the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy can do far more to tackle our ocean’s greatest challenge: climate change.

On 21 May 2024, the International Tribunal for the Law of the Sea (ITLOS) was unanimous in their advisory opinion on climate change that UNCLOS State Parties have a stringent obligation to protect the marine environment from the deleterious effects of climate change. The Tribunal classified greenhouse gas

The complex threats to the marine environment from climate change demand coordinated transboundary responses to these impacts. The proliferation and overlap of institutions and legal instruments under UNCLOS, however, present a challenge to a coherent approach to marine ecological security. The threat of climate change, for example, requires a coherent cross-institutional approach from institutions as diverse as the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) for shipping; the Food and Agricultural Organisation (FAO) for fisheries; and United National Environment Programme (UNEP) for the marine environment. This transboundary response is dependent on the capacity for robust scientific research and the development and transfer of technology for innovation.

If states are serious about a rules-based order and protecting the maritime environment from climate impacts, deeper investment is needed in the institutional architecture of the law of the sea, including reinvigorating transparent and accountable UN coordination mechanisms. This is necessary as global powers push new norms that undermine the integrity of UNCLOS.

While the impacts of climate change are unevenly distributed globally, as are the capacity, resources and quality of state action to preserve the ecological security of the marine environment differences between Indo-Pacific states in marine scientific research and marine technology can slow innovation for transformative resilience, adaptation and restoration measures. There are a number of practical ways in which institutional mechanisms can address both the urgency of the problem and the varying capacities of states. What is needed is leadership from all members of the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, using the most effective and practical means available to them for this purpose.

On the horizon are unilateral, industry and private NGO funded interventions that divert regulation of marine environment from oversight and accountability under the UN system. Despite the failure of UN-based treaties and mechanisms to curb climate change, the solution to combat its impacts nevertheless requires us to turn toward UN.

The value of existing UN mechanisms is that state action is enhanced through accountable systems within the rules-based international order under the UN system. They are also the most comprehensive coordination mechanisms for the collective action problem of global, transboundary issues like climate change. The mechanisms detailed below are robust, transparent and predicated on consensus-based best available science.

How can states be supported to fulfil newly stringent obligations under Part XII— Protection and Preservation of the Marine Environment — for climate change impacts? First, all members of the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean

Economy can revitalise the currently under-utilised UN-Oceans, its principal mechanism for strengthening coordination and coherence in ocean affairs. It has 30 members, less than half of which are active. The Joint Inspection Unit of the UN review highlighted its members fail to operate as “one United Nations”, as resource constraints mean that where they overlap in competence they can often regard one another as rivals. The Division for Ocean Affairs and the Law of the Sea (DOALAS) is the appropriate authority to operate the UN-Oceans Secretariat. DOALAS’s recent leadership on the High Seas Biodiversity Treaty shows the division’s capability in marine protection, resilience and restoration.

Second, the Regional Fishery Body Secretariats’ Network (RSN) and Sustainable Ocean Initiative (SOI) Global Dialogue are also under-utilised. These cross institutional mechanisms have the convening power to build an integrated and harmonised approach to marine protection under Part XII. The RSN network between Regional Fisheries Bodies (RFB) and the SOI Dialogue between RFMOs and Regional Seas Organisations enhance institutional capacity to deliver urgently needed climate conservation measures. Both fora are crucial to facilitate the sharing of best practice and impactful innovations across ocean regions.

Thirdly, to combat climate change, deeper investment is needed in UNESCO’s Intergovernmental Oceanographic Commission (IOC). The IOC is mandated to promote international cooperation and to coordinate research and capacity-building to understand, manage and protect the marine environment. Historically, the IOC struggled with insufficient resources to adequately translate ocean science into integrated governance solutions; however, the revitalisation of IOC resourcing for the UN Decade of Ocean Science 2021-2030 signals a new era in assisting states in the fulfilment of Part XIII — Marine Scientific Research — of UNCLOS. This expanded role is pivotal for developing consensus-based ocean science and innovations to protect and restore the marine environment from climate impacts. In relation to Part XIV — Development and Transfer of Marine Technology — of UNCLOS, the IOC presents another under-utilised mechanism for the development and equitable transfer of marine technology as it relates to the protection, resilience and restoration of the marine environment for the benefit of all.

The performance of these coordination mechanisms depends on structure, resourcing, and member cooperation. Australia, as a founding member of the High Level Panel for a Sustainable Ocean Economy, should lead by investing in these coordination mechanisms to avert climate change impacts and enhance ecological security. This commitment can contribute to ecological security for a more sustainable and secure Indo-Pacific region.

Media Reporting Literacy in Maritime Issues: An Overlooked Key to Regional Cooperation

By Lupita Wijaya

Strategic media engagement is a crucial yet often overlooked tool for fostering collaboration in maritime issues. One of the key challenges lies in the limited maritime reporting literacy among journalists and coastal communities, who often lack access to specialised training, scientific resources, or government briefings on maritime governance and security.

This gap highlights the need for initiatives such as a media fellowship program, which can equip journalists with the knowledge and expertise to report accurately and responsibly on maritime issues. By enhancing journalists' understanding of maritime law, maritime jargon or terminology, geopolitics, and environmental issues, these efforts can improve the quality of reporting, foster regional dialogue, and contribute to more informed and well-prepared media landscape capable of covering maritime issues with greater accuracy and depth.

Flagging the Issues: Why Media?

The South China Sea is a key example of the importance of media in shaping public opinions, influencing diplomatic narratives, and informing policy discussions — a topic I have been researching for the past 11 years.

The South China Sea is surrounded by densely populated Southeast Asian countries, but the activities that take place there are over the horizon and far from the public eye. This distance makes the media's role crucial in constructing this globally significant conflict in the minds of the public in the claimant and stakeholding states. While traditional diplomatic efforts and military posturing have dominated strategies and initiatives, there is an increasing need to adopt a more nuanced approach that includes media engagement.

Maritime reporting literacy is essential for journalists covering complex maritime issues, as misreporting can lead to public misunderstandings, policy missteps, and uninformed regulations. An example of this is Total Allowable Catch regulations, which set legal limits on how much fish fishermen can catch to prevent overfishing and the importance of local media to inform the communities affected. Inadequate information about these regulations, including the role of local media in effectively explaining such policies, can lead to confusion and potential non-compliance. Strengthening maritime reporting literacy among journalists is crucial to bridging this information gap, ensuring that policies are

clearly communicated and understood by those whose livelihoods depend on them.

Another similar example concerns dwelling time. In 2015, Indonesian media extensively reported on prolonged dwelling times at major ports — particularly Tanjung Priok in Jakarta — attributing delays primarily to government inefficiencies. This narrow focus led to public outcry and prompted the government to implement swift measures aimed at reducing dwelling times. However, subsequent analyses revealed that these reforms did not achieve the desired outcomes. Instead, they inadvertently increased logistics costs due to factors such as the Transfer of Pile Location (Indonesian: Pindah Lokasi Penimbunan) — a policy that relocated goods to alternative storage locations rather than addressing congestion at its source. Crucially, another major cause of delays was largely overlooked in media coverage: importers deliberately postponing customs clearance to use ports as warehouses to stockpile cargo at cheaper rates. The initial media coverage failed to consider the multifaceted causes of extended dwelling times, including the roles of importers, private sector logistics, and infrastructure limitations. As a result, the implemented policies addressed only surface-level symptoms rather than the underlying systemic issues.

Increased journalistic maritime literacy is crucial because of the function of the media in giving public access to information. Journalists trained in maritime issues can bridge the gap between policymakers and the public, fulfilling the role of media as a public sphere in facilitating discussions and debates on current affairs. Current regional initiatives addressing maritime issues, such as marine protection agreements and diplomatic dialogues, are often implemented without strategic media engagement, which limits public accessibility and understanding towards these complex issues. As a result, journalists in the region may cover South China Sea topics sporadically or fail to dive beneath the wavetops. This gap is primarily due to the limited access journalists have to scientific resources, legal jargon, and environmental expertise. This environment means that many issues of maritime security and/or conflict are left underreported or misunderstood.

The second key reason for strategic media engagement — initiatives that enable journalists, researchers, and policymakers from different countries to share knowledge, pool resources, and learn from one another's experiences in maritime reporting — is to expand networks and promote regional collaboration. Beyond bridging the gap between the state and the public, journalists play an important role in building networks of information-sharing across borders and sharing of best practices in maritime reporting. For example, regional collaborations like the Asia Investigative Reporting Network (AIR Network) and the Earth Journalism Network (EJN) facilitate cross-border investigative projects and environmental

reporting, ensuring that critical issues receive sustained coverage (longevity) and broader public awareness (visibility). This effort makes information more inclusive and digestible, as well as encouraging dialogue, preventing the isolation of local issues by integrating them into a ready regional or global conversation.

Developing a Specialised Media Fellowship Program

To address the above challenges and gap, this article proposes the development of a media fellowship program focused on maritime reporting and literacy. The program will start with an ASEAN-focused approach, specifically training journalists from Indonesia, the Philippines, Vietnam, and Malaysia. Brunei, though a claimant, has maintained a low-profile stance and displayed deference to China's South China Sea claims. The Philippines and Indonesia, as the largest economies in Southeast Asia, holds important influence within the ASEAN, therefore playing a pivotal role in regional dialogues. The Philippines and Vietnam are two prominent disputants in the South China Sea (SCS) disputes, with the Philippines' high-profile international arbitration cases against China over contested maritime areas. Vietnam is a key claimant in the SCS disputes, and its fishing industry is significant to its maritime economy and local livelihoods. Malaysia's role in the SCS dispute is somewhat quieter than that of the Philippines or Vietnam, but Malaysia also has overlapping claims in the region and its coastal communities — like Sabah and Sarawak — depend heavily on marine resources.

The fellowship program would offer field-specific training workshops, as well as partnerships with diverse expert and scholars, along with government officials from Australia and Southeast Asia countries. Australia is well-positioned as a mentor country for this program due to two factors. First, unlike many countries in the Asia-Pacific region, Australia has a strong tradition of press freedom and independent journalism. Second, existing Australia-ASEAN media engagement initiative (e.g. Australia-Southeast Asia Media and Broadcasting Initiative) demonstrate Australia's ongoing commitment to supporting capacity-building in regional journalism.

More broadly, ASEAN is also a critical partner for Australia in economic, security, and diplomatic matter, reinforcing the importance of sustained engagement. Australia's inclusion in this program aligns with its long-standing partnership with ASEAN as part of its regional priorities. This is not solely about geopolitical positioning but also about leveraging Australia's strong journalistic institutions and expertise in specialised fields, particularly maritime reporting, which remains often lacks sufficient attention in the region.

Similar initiatives, such as the Earth Journalism Network (EJN) for environmental

reporting and the Thomson Reuters Foundation's human rights journalism programs, have shown that specialised media training can improve accuracy and foster cross-border collaboration. Building on these successes, this article proposes a maritime-focused media fellowship to equip journalists with learning and networking in maritime reporting.

Strengthening Maritime Domain Awareness: A Common Maritime Database in Southeast Asia

By Jeslyn Tan

Maritime data in Southeast Asia is fragmented across various sources, complicating efforts to locate relevant data. However, this could be enhanced with a common maritime database.

Southeast Asia hosts some of the world's most critical sea lines of communication (SLOCs). Approximately 67 percent of Australia's export value and slightly over 40 percent of its import value traverse the Indonesian archipelago, which is linked to key maritime routes such as the Straits of Malacca, the South China Sea, and the Sulawesi Sea. Any disruptions to these Southeast Asian SLOCs, which are vulnerable to various maritime threats, would be detrimental to Australia's economic security. This makes Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) in Southeast Asia crucial, including through sharing information that allows states and law enforcement agencies to establish a comprehensive "Common Operating Picture."

Yet Southeast Asia lacks a unified database system to integrate and systematically store data on diverse maritime activities and threats. The region's maritime economic activities generate valuable historical data on shipping volumes and different maritime threats like piracy incidents, armed robbery cases, and kidnappings for ransom, which could significantly benefit research, defence planning, and strategic decision-making. However, this data is currently fragmented, often confined to annual reports of information-sharing organisations or law enforcement agencies, with older records difficult to access online. Therefore, establishing a common maritime database is imperative.

The ASEAN Secretariat, through the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) or Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), could lead and manage the common maritime database. As ASEAN's Dialogue Partners like Australia, Japan, South Korea, and the European Union (EU) seek to expand their partnerships and integration with ASEAN members, a common database also offers a credible and useful project for deepening maritime collaboration with the regional states. They could provide technical expertise and support to develop the database as they are user states of the critical Southeast Asian SLOCs too.

Unlike the defunct ASEAN Information-Sharing Portal, which has been replaced by the IFC Real-Time Information-Sharing System (IRIS), this repository should focus on integrating and storing historical data on maritime activities and threats,

such as shipping, vessel registration, armed robbery, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, among many others, instead of providing live updates. To minimise sovereignty concerns, and a broader reluctance from states, the common database could be categorised by country and activity, and be managed with mostly low classification data. By providing a historical picture of how a threat or maritime activity has developed over the years, the database would offer empirical support for trend analysis, inform policy decisions, and improve response strategies for future challenges.

A common maritime database would ideally involve contributions and coordination from multiple stakeholders, including countries like Australia, who have an interest in regional maritime order. ASEAN member states would have to provide the foundational data and input from their national maritime agencies, including coast guards, navies, fisheries departments, marine departments, and border authorities. Meanwhile, regional information-sharing organisations like the International Maritime Bureau Piracy Reporting Centre (IMB PRC), the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia Information Sharing Centre (ReCAAP ISC), the Information Fusion Centre (IFC), academia, think tanks, and the maritime industry could assume indispensable supporting roles by contributing information and data as well.

By consolidating data from various sources and storing archived data, a common maritime database could provide a more comprehensive and holistic view of maritime activities and threats in Southeast Asia. It would enable maritime law enforcement agencies to identify patterns, trends, and emerging threats, and the hotspots more effectively, enhancing their ability to prepare for and respond proactively to maritime security challenges. The maritime database can also strengthen information sharing and coordination for joint operations and resource allocation, enhancing the overall effectiveness of regional maritime security efforts. Additionally, the research and shipping communities could also utilise the data for their own purposes, contributing to a more comprehensive MDA.

Other than functioning as a maritime data repository, the common maritime database can also help enhance trust between different stakeholders in the sector. Interagency competition exists in many Southeast Asian countries, including those with a national coordinating agency for all maritime affairs, as well as at the regional level. For instance, IFC primarily relies on inputs from its 26 International Liaison Officers (ILOs) and open-source information. Critical data from coast guards, civilian agencies, and the shipping industry remains limited, largely due to the perception that the initiative is predominantly navy-driven. This perception is rooted in interagency competition in each country, hindering effective regional information sharing and collaboration.

Engaging different national agencies as users of the common maritime database necessitates collaboration and transparency, encouraging each agency to share its data and information. Increased transparency fosters mutual understanding, in turn building trust among stakeholders. This principle can also extend to the private sector, which can benefit from the platform as users. Many major maritime players are interested in researching maritime threats, and such a platform would prove valuable to them. Enhanced risk assessments supported by data can help shipping companies negotiate for lower insurance premiums. However, access to the database should be contingent on their contribution of relevant data or even funding, ensuring a reciprocal flow of information that enhances the platform's overall utility and sustainability.

Meanwhile, regional workshops and training programs should be held to ensure effective adoption of the common maritime database by all stakeholders. The trainings can also act as an avenue where the stakeholders meet, engage, and interact with each other. It can be conducted as part of the ASEAN Maritime Security Information-Sharing Exercise, the Maritime Information Sharing Exercise, and/or the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise. These exercises should expand participation beyond navies and coast guards to include private industry stakeholders, other maritime-related agencies, and regional information-sharing organisations. Through tabletop exercises, training sessions, and workshops, this inclusive approach would enhance collective maritime situational awareness and foster greater collaboration across sectors.

A common maritime database would complement and enhance maritime law enforcement capacities by providing a centralised platform for data integration, analysis, coordination, and collaboration, thereby strengthening MDA in Southeast Asia.