

Navigating Maritime Governance in the Indo-Pacific



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FRONT MATTER

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The briefs in this series were created as the output of a series of tailored online professional development workshops designed to enhance the participants skills and foster innovation in the area of maritime governance. These online sessions were complemented by an in-person workshop between 17-21 February 2025 in Yokosuka, Japan organized by Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies (YCAPS).

Cover image

Title: Coast Guard Cutter Stratton engages with Indonesian Bakamla (Coast Guard)

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Navigating Maritime Governance in the Indo-Pacific

Across the Indo-Pacific, maritime governance has assumed heightened significance as a determinant of regional stability, economic resilience, and environmental security. Amid intensifying strategic competition, particularly in contested and strategically vital waters, coastal and island states are confronted not only by conventional security challenges, but also by an expanding set of non-traditional maritime threats. Illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, limited maritime domain awareness, fragmented legal and institutional frameworks, and accelerating climate impacts increasingly strain the capacity of states to manage their maritime spaces effectively. These pressures are especially acute for developing states with extensive exclusive economic zones but constrained administrative and technological resources.

In this context, the urgency of rethinking maritime governance has grown. States are seeking to assert their agency and protect their interests within an increasingly complex and contested maritime landscape. Vulnerabilities such as persistent gender inequities in the blue economy, enforcement gaps in fisheries governance, and the underutilization of naval assets for diplomatic and constabulary purposes, underscore the limitations of existing approaches. Simultaneously, structural impediments to cooperation and institutional fragmentation hinder the development of effective, inclusive governance frameworks.

What emerges is a maritime region marked by the convergence of strategic rivalry, governance asymmetries, and ecological fragility. These dynamics demand integrated and multidimensional responses, ones that not only enhance state capacity and legal coherence, but also prioritize equitable participation and regionally grounded solutions. Addressing these challenges will require renewed investment in legal reform, technological innovation, and inclusive partnerships that align external support with locally defined priorities. In doing so, Indo-Pacific states can begin to forge more adaptive and resilient maritime governance systems capable of meeting the demands of a rapidly changing regional environment.

Brief overview of the series

YCAPS in partnership with the East-West Center, convened a cohort of professionals from across the Indo-Pacific to develop practical innovative ideas to advance the region's evolving maritime governance.

INTRODUCTION

By Isak Nordenberg

The authors are the second cohort of YCAPS' Indo-Pacific Maritime GENIE initiative. After actively participating in series of online conversations with top experts they assembled in Yokosuka for a workshop in February 2025. The resultant commentary series includes policy-focused contributions that span five broad thematic areas: blue economy engagement, maritime domain awareness, national governance reform, strategic communication and naval diplomacy, and IUU fishing. While each brief targets a specific issue area or national context, together they underscore the urgency of integrated, multilevel cooperation in addressing maritime risks and opportunities across the Indo-Pacific.

Underlying themes

Gaps between regional needs and external priorities

Many Indo-Pacific coastal and island states find themselves at the intersection of pressing maritime challenges and externally driven policy agendas. While external actors, particularly Australia, Japan, and the United States, have significantly expanded their capacity-building and security assistance across the region, the alignment between donor priorities and the practical needs of recipient states remains uneven. For smaller and developing maritime nations, the most immediate concerns are often tied to fisheries enforcement, environmental resilience, and economic sustainability, rather than geopolitical competition or high-end deterrence.

Several contributors to this volume point to the disconnect between top-down regional strategies and the specific, often under-resourced challenges faced by local maritime authorities. For instance, proposals related to ship-rider agreements, maritime domain awareness (MDA) coordination, and fisheries governance reflect a clear demand for low-cost, high-impact measures that can strengthen state presence in national waters and foster cooperative enforcement. These observations suggest that the effectiveness of external support will hinge on its responsiveness to local priorities and its ability to enhance, not override, existing governance efforts.

Broadening the scope of maritime governance

Efforts to strengthen maritime governance in the Indo-Pacific increasingly reflect a shift away from conventional security-centric models. While naval deployments, law enforcement, and sovereignty protections continue to play a central role, there is growing acknowledgement among regional actors that stability at sea also depends on broader factors, economic inclusion, environmental protection, and social equity among them. In several cases, governments and analysts have called for governance frameworks that go beyond deterrence and surveillance, instead aiming to modernize institutions, improve inter-agency coordination, and support underrepresented groups in maritime economies.

This rethinking is visible in proposals advocating for greater gender inclusion in the blue economy, as well as in efforts to redefine naval engagement as a tool not just of coercion, but of diplomacy and development. As climate risks intensify and resource pressures mount, many Indo-Pacific governments are now exploring governance approaches that can better serve coastal communities over the long term. These are not abstract shifts. Rather, they signal a growing interest in maritime policy models that are not only legally enforceable, but also flexible, socially embedded, and responsive to local needs. Still, questions remain over whether existing regional mechanisms are equipped to support this broader agenda, or whether new institutional tools are required to match the complexity of today's maritime challenges.

Key Takeaways

- Genevieve Donnellon-May calls for targeted, community-based data collection to better understand and support the often-invisible labor of coastal families and workers in the blue economy, emphasizing that inclusive, locally informed monitoring systems are essential for equitable development, climate resilience, and sustainable ocean governance.
- Regional coast guard cooperation remains underdeveloped in South Asia, despite the growing need for coordinated responses to non-traditional maritime threats. Rubiat Saimum proposes a Bay of Bengal coast guard forum to institutionalize this cooperation, arguing that shared practices and information flows would bolster regional resilience.
- Naval forces are not only instruments of deterrence but also potential agents of diplomacy, disaster relief, and rule-based order. Paul Chamberlain argues that expanding the conceptual scope of naval activity could allow states to pursue strategic objectives without contributing to regional insecurity.
- Donor countries often misalign their assistance with local needs. As Aaron Magunna highlights, Australia and Japan could maximize the impact of their maritime aid by focusing on inclusive governance, capacity-building, and long-term institutional development, rather than narrow security goals.

- IUU fishing remains one of the most persistent maritime challenges in the Indian Ocean. Abhimanyu Singh advocates for cooperative enforcement mechanisms such as Regional Fisheries Management Organizations (RFMOs), High Seas Boarding and Inspection (HSBI) protocols, and ship-rider agreements, tools that are relatively affordable but highly effective for states with limited naval capacity.
- Indonesia's fragmented and under-resourced maritime institutions hinder its ability to govern its vast archipelagic waters. Sayed Fauzan Riyadi calls for comprehensive institutional reform and the cultivation of maritime leadership to build a more coherent and strategic governance framework.
- Despite its substantial maritime engagement, Japan lacks a unified national maritime strategy. Yuki Bito emphasizes the need for integrated policy coordination between the Japan Coast Guard and Maritime Self-Defense Force, arguing that strategic clarity would enhance Japan's credibility and trust among regional partners.
- In the Philippines, maritime governance remains siloed and outdated. Ivy Ganadillo argues for a whole-of-government and whole-of-nation approach, integrating development, enforcement, and community engagement into a modernized and resilient institutional architecture.
- De Xian Chong underscores the need for more structured and multilateral cooperation among regional Maritime Information Sharing Centers (ISCs). The creation of a permanent forum to convene regional ISCs, such as Singapore's Information Fusion Centre (IFC) and the UNODC Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP), would help facilitate best practices, and address operational challenges.
- Environmental degradation, especially around ports, is an emerging challenge in the Indo-Pacific. Pham Ngoc Minh Trang calls for improved ASEAN–IORA cooperation and investment in sustainable port governance. She argues that environmental security must be addressed through both institutional and infrastructural solutions.

An important note

It is important to note that these articles were written and edited in early 2025 and therefore reflect the world as the authors understood it to be at that time.

Disclaimer

The ten articles in this compilation were **originally published in May 2025 by the East-West Center** as an *Asia-Pacific Bulletin* series. The original publications can be accessed [here](#).

INTRODUCTION

Empowering Blue Economy Communities through Data and Innovation

By Genevieve Donnellon-May¹

As the blue economy grows in importance — encompassing sectors from fisheries and aquaculture to maritime transport and offshore energy — so too must our understanding of the families and communities who power it. Given the continuing rise in commercial fishing demand and aquaculture expansion, the importance of ocean resources for global food security and economic stability has become even more critical. Unsustainable practices like overfishing and ocean acidification further threaten both marine ecosystems and community livelihoods. Coastal laborers and their families often remain invisible, underpaid, and vulnerable despite their oversized role in sustaining ocean-based industries. To ensure a more inclusive and sustainable ocean economy, a Targeted Research and Data Collection Program to gather comprehensive data collection and monitoring systems to recognize these contributions and enhance protections for entire communities, while also advancing Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 14 (sustainable oceans), is needed.

The labor of coastal communities and families in the blue economy is often undocumented, undervalued, and vulnerable to environmental and economic shocks. Workers and families play critical roles across sectors such as fisheries and aquaculture — especially in post-harvest processing, distribution, and small-scale trade — yet these contributions are frequently informal and excluded from official statistics. According to the United Nations Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), in small-scale fisheries alone, over 120 million people depend on fisheries for their livelihoods. Almost 97 percent of people relying on fisheries are in developing countries, and more than 90 percent participate in small-scale fisheries. Meanwhile, an estimated 57 million laborers worldwide are sustained by capture fisheries alone. Yet the essential labor that sustains these ocean-based industries remains largely invisible in policy and development planning.

The blue economy — particularly fishing and aquaculture — is highly vulnerable to climate change, due in part to rising sea levels, increasing temperatures, changes in ocean currents, and ocean acidification, all of which directly affect the stability of marine resources. As the families, laborers, and communities in coastal regions depend heavily on fishing, aquaculture, and related industries for their livelihoods, the adverse effects of climate change place increasing pressure on these industries, undermining both food security and income.

[1] Genevieve Donnellon-May is an Asia-Pacific analyst at The Red Line, a Fellow at the Indo-Pacific Studies Center, and a researcher at the Oxford Global Society.

Concurrently, unsustainable practices like overfishing and pollution further exacerbate these vulnerabilities, threatening not only the health of the oceans but also the very livelihoods of coastal communities working in these sectors. In these regions where economic opportunities are limited, it is often entire households that must navigate the compounded challenges of climate change and environmental degradation.

Despite their significant roles in marine sectors, families and laborers remain underrepresented in decision-making and management positions. They are largely confined to lower-level roles with minimal representation in leadership.

A critical first step toward supporting equitable and sustainable development in the blue economy is the establishment and implementation of robust monitoring systems that collect local data and strategic indicators in communities. This data is essential for understanding key indicators such as employment rates, household incomes and economic contributions, occupational jobs, social protection and access, and representation in leadership positions across coastal sectors. Data should also reflect informal and subsistence-based labor, which is often overlooked in traditional surveys, alongside governance and representation and infrastructure and services. Doing so can help identify existing gaps and inform more effective interventions to address disparities and support blue economy workers and their families.

Comprehensive, community-based research is essential for achieving long-term sustainability in the blue economy. A 2020 study by the European Union highlighted persistent challenges in marine industries stemming from limited socioeconomic data and insufficient evaluation of environmental impacts. To effectively meet the targets of the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – especially SDG 14, which calls for the conservation and sustainable use of oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development – greater investment in localized data collection is needed. This includes tracking employment trends, income sources, ecosystem health, fish stock assessments, infrastructure availability, education and training opportunities, and resilience to climate impacts. Monitoring governance participation and the distribution of public services in coastal areas can also help identify gaps and guide the design of more inclusive, adaptive, and sustainable ocean policies to better support local communities who work in related jobs.

To address these gaps, the development of an innovative Targeted Research and Data Collection and Monitoring program is recommended. This pilot program would collect locally grounded, disaggregated data across Indo-Pacific maritime countries, focusing on employment, income, working conditions, and leadership across blue economy sectors. The data gathered will be analyzed to identify patterns, vulnerabilities, and gaps affecting coastal workers and communities. By introducing this program, we can build a framework for future data collection efforts, ensuring more inclusive, evidence-based, and sustainable policies.

The success of this pilot program would be a critical step in shaping policies that support coastal livelihoods and economic resilience in the blue economy. It will also lay the foundation for the development of further initiatives in the region, ultimately contributing to sustainable ocean governance. Additionally, the insights generated through this research could help protect livelihoods, enhance participation in marine industries, and strengthen the long-term well-being of ocean-dependent communities.

The importance of this initiative is underscored by recent and past efforts that highlight the power of community-led data and monitoring systems. For example, new research — backed by the FAO, Pew Charitable Trusts, and the FISH Safety Foundation — has prompted the development of a global mechanism to reduce fisher mortality, after findings revealed that annual fatalities may exceed 100,000. This research, driven by collaboration with local fishers and organizations, demonstrates how targeted data collection can uncover systemic risks and drive life-saving reforms.

Similarly, in Turkey, the creation of the country's first report on the status of fisherwomen and the founding of the Fisherwomen Society led to transformative recognition and support. These efforts were honored with the United Nations Equator Prize in 2014 for demonstrating how grassroots monitoring and inclusion can catalyze more resilient and sustainable marine communities.

By establishing robust monitoring systems across Indo-Pacific maritime countries, this pilot program can help deliver equitable and sustainable outcomes for blue economy workers and their communities — setting the foundation for long-term ocean governance that reflects both global priorities and local realities.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and the Case for a Bay of Bengal Coast Guard Forum

By Rubiat Saimum²

The Bay of Bengal is an epicenter of non-traditional security threats. As such, coast guards in the sub-region have been at the forefront of managing and tackling security challenges. However, there is no institutional framework for enhancing the capacities of coast guards of the Bay of Bengal to take collaborative action. Therefore, creating a Bay of Bengal coast guard forum is an essential next step to addressing the non-traditional security threats and providing a platform to promote and institutionalize maritime best practices.

Transnational Security Issues in The Bay of Bengal

The threats posed by non-state actors are the most pressing transnational vulnerabilities facing the littoral states of the Bay of Bengal. These vulnerabilities are manifested in forms of human trafficking, irregular migration, smuggling, illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, piracy, and maritime pollution.

The over-exploitation of fish stocks has led to the depletion of marine resources, prompting competition over limited catch and a swift increase in illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing across the Bay. Fishermen from Bangladesh, India, Myanmar, and Sri Lanka crossing into the exclusive economic zones (EEZ) and territorial waters of neighboring countries has become a common occurrence in the Bay of Bengal. This problem has not been effectively addressed due to the limited monitoring and surveillance capabilities needed to prevent IUU products from entering markets. Without an elaborated enforcement mechanism, fish stocks would face further pressure, exacerbating food insecurity in the Bay.

A related issue is the problem of marine pollution. Chemical and biological pollutants from industrial zones of littoral states flow directly into the Bay of Bengal via river systems. Illegal dumping of ballast waters from commercial vessels similarly damages the marine ecosystems. These human-driven factors, coupled with the effects of climate change, are the most likely causes for the formation of a 60,000 sq. km² wide dead zone in the middle of the bay. The formation and expansion of this dead zone will disrupt the health of the entire ecosystem by further depleting the existing fish stocks in the bay.

The southern tip of the bay is connected to the Malacca Strait, which is the transit point for \$3.5 trillion worth of global trade. The strait is also a main energy lifeline for the East Asian economies, serving as a key route for energy imports from the Middle East.

[2] Rubiat Saimum is a graduate student of the department of political science at Memorial University of Newfoundland as well as an incoming PhD student at Queen's University, Kingston

The security and safety of this supply chain are affected by piracy and armed robbery. According to International Maritime Bureau (IMB) statistics in 2024, straits near Bangladesh, Indonesia, and Singapore collectively accounted for 63% of global incidents of maritime piracy and armed robbery.

Furthermore, the Bay of Bengal is a global hotspot for irregular migration, human trafficking, and smuggling, especially since the beginning of the Rohingya boat crisis. Rohingyas headed for Malaysia, Thailand, and Indonesia from Myanmar and refugee camps in Bangladesh were unable to land or even pushed back to the sea when they arrived at the shore. The lack of regional cooperation on transnational irregular migration ultimately led to this protracted humanitarian crisis at sea. Additionally, the Myanmar junta losing control over the large coastline of the state will likely create a governance vacuum in the adjacent area of the bay, a main outlet of narcotics smuggling from the 'Golden Triangle' region — a key source of global opium production.

Transnational Mechanism for Transnational Security Problems

Given the severity of the transnational threats in the Bay of Bengal, the region requires a durable transnational security governance architecture to address these pressing challenges. Two approaches can address these challenges: First, creating conditions for a 'net-security provider' to take the initiative to address the regional non-traditional security issues. Alternatively, establishing a pluralistic regional security mechanism with the participation of the Bay of Bengal littoral states could also address these security vulnerabilities.

The idea of a 'net-security provider' in the Bay of Bengal is unrealistic in application because no one regional state has the capacity necessary to provide security to this vast maritime space. Moreover, the very discussion of a 'net-security provider' can raise regional distrust and instigate geopolitical competition.

A Bay of Bengal Coast Guard Forum (BBCGF) could be a significant next step toward establishing a pluralistic security order in the sub-region. While a coast guard forum may not fully address complex and systemic maritime vulnerabilities such as climate change, it could be useful in institutionalizing routine enforcement procedures against IUU fishing, marine pollution, piracy, irregular migration, maritime terrorism, and drug trafficking. Moreover, the non-military nature of the coast guards would enable more effective maritime enforcement without triggering geopolitical tensions.

BBCGF can also augment the operational capabilities of the coast guards through information and resource sharing. The forum may also include an advisory team of maritime scholars to integrate theory with practice. The forum may draw members from the Bay of Bengal Initiative for Multi-Sectoral Technical and Economic Cooperation (BIMSTEC) countries, as well as Malaysia, Singapore and Indonesia, as these three countries are critical to the security of the Bay of Bengal.

The structure of the forum can be modelled on North Atlantic Coast Guard Forum (NACGF), with an executive committee comprising the eight coast guard chiefs as its highest decision-making body. Five sub-committees specialized in thematic issues will operate under the executive committee: Search and Rescue operations, IUU fishing, Transnational Organized Crime (TOC), Maritime Environmental Protection and Irregular Migration. Each sub-committee would consist of a specific number of coast guard officials and subject matter specialists. The working committees would jointly produce an annual report outlining recommendations to enhance the interoperability of the coast guards.

The BBCGF would complement the regional integration agenda of BIMSTEC by institutionalizing security practices at a transnational level while bolstering the operational capabilities and preparedness of the regional coastguards. Aside from addressing non-traditional security challenges, the forum would advance 'rules-based maritime order' by creating conditions for a collective maritime domain awareness mechanism in the Bay of Bengal and its adjacent seas, while operating as a track 1.5 initiative to build trust among the partner countries in the sub-region.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Conceptualizing Navies as a Tool of Statecraft

By Paul Chamberlain³

The Indo-Pacific's maritime domain is a key arena in the rising China-United States strategic rivalry. However, viewing the maritime domain through the lens of strategic rivalry leads policymakers to focus on the traditional combat role of navies thereby obscuring the wider everyday role of sea power as a force in shaping and influencing the regional order. Yet navies offer policymakers many wider choices beyond the "thunder of battle," especially for non-great powers who are unlikely to utilize sea power to impose their will through combat. Accordingly, all states who seek agency and influence in the region, should adopt a more holistic conceptualization of sea power so it can be used more effectively as an instrument of statecraft. Navies must always be defined by their core mission of fighting and winning at and from the sea, but the robust role for navies in statecraft is a critical contribution in preventing such conflict and securing a desirable strategic environment. We need an updated concept of sea power that considers it as an act of statecraft, the strategic use of sea power by states through the constellation of naval operations and activities that seeks or has purposeful political and diplomatic effect.

The strategic environment in the Indo-Pacific region is intrinsically maritime in nature. Its oceans, seas, and waterways are pivotally important for its people. The key feature of the contemporary strategic situation is the return of China to great power status and its fractious relations with the United States and its regional allies. Maritime issues provide a visible manifestation of this contestation between the United States and China. The increased investment in naval platforms by Indo-Pacific states, especially the growth of the Chinese navy, gives concern that the maritime order is trending toward further competition. These factors and the importance of the maritime space are rhetorically referenced in the strategic discourse of the region as a matter of course. This implies that sea power, predominantly through navies and coast guards, is an important aspect of international relations in the region. Yet it is often viewed through anachronistic lenses of "gunboat diplomacy" or ritualistic "naval diplomacy." While the practice of sea power in statecraft is long-standing and appears intrinsically understood, it is rarely systematically explained. More starkly, the use of sea power as a foreign policy instrument is usually assumed to be the department of great powers.

[3] Mr. Paul Chamberlain is a PhD candidate at the Australian National University, in the Strategic and Defence Studies Centre and Coral Bell School of Asia Pacific Affairs. He has also worked for the Canadian government in a variety of Defence and Security roles for over 15 years.

However, as Andrew Lambert argues, it has often been weaker powers who have leveraged sea power in order to increase their influence. Maritime governance is not solely the domain of great powers. In the contemporary world, small and medium-sized states also influence the regional maritime order through sea power. Accordingly, policymakers from states of all sizes should be asking by what means might this be achieved.

Navies are critical in providing a robust and functioning maritime governance regime across the region. However, they rarely receive public credit and their role is not well-understood by a wider audience across government, academia, and the general public. In an era of tight budgets yet expanding capability requirements, navies need to do a better job of advertising the wide range of strategic influence possible through the practice of sea power. Most policymakers acknowledge navies can be a tool of statecraft.

However, the region deserves a more concerted group effort by proactive partners to consider the full range of activities that are available for policymakers; the creation of a “menu” of sea power activities that can be leveraged for various effects. We need to imagine the wide spectrum of sea power activities in a systemic context and therefore how it effects the provision of maritime governance in the region. In doing so, navies are not reduced to a role of solely delivering hard power but rather in delivering the “good order at sea” that is critical for the lives of the peoples who reside in the region.

To start, we must recognize that navies are not only ships (although replete with important social and normative meaning), but complex institutions of significance in international society. Navies, as armed maritime forces, offer a unique ability to operate along a spectrum of soft and hard power, virtually instantaneously, and with historical and legal legitimacy. Navies, as institutions, give a sophisticated tool of diplomatic effect through a range of activities that serve to build relations between states both bilaterally and through international organizations. Sea power embraces a panoply of activities undertaken by navies incorporating port visits, exercises, international laws and norms, mini- and multilateral institutions, capacity-building, procurement, education, and people-to-people ties. The spectrum of sea power spans operational deployments potentially using deadly force, humanitarian assistance, counter-piracy, environmental protection or safeguarding fisheries, information-sharing, technology development, naval leadership talks, conferences, basing and infrastructure, personnel exchanges, and numerous other facets of maritime engagement. Through this, we can see how the “menu” of sea power can be utilized for a range of systemic objectives from order-management, diplomatic relationship-building, and discursive influence. Of course, the size and capabilities of a navy will influence how many and how often such activities may occur.

But, as in other areas of statecraft, it simply means policymakers have to be smarter both in the practice of their own sea power and as the recipient of others'. Accordingly, small and medium powers need to move away from standard assumptions on sea power (that are written with great powers in mind) and instead view the use of navies as a foreign policy tool through a wider statecraft lens. This requires a holistic view of strategic policymaking and statecraft across the entirety of government.

Therefore, it is proposed that within and between the non-great powers of the region, the navies should bring this wider definition of sea power into formal doctrine, education, and training at all levels. Policymakers should understand sea power as a nuanced tool of statecraft capable of delivering multiple policy effects and systemic influence. Most importantly, the bridging the worlds of professional sailors and civilians through more mutual exchanges and embedded positions in each other's institutions is vital. A professional community of maritime practitioners across the region who grasp the full extent of sea power as a policy instrument and who can advise governments and multilateral institutions would make an important contribution to regional maritime governance.

Navies are "diplomatic influencers" and regional maritime governance rests upon their shoulders through everyday practice. Providing a more nuanced concept of sea power would increase our collective ability to pursue greater maritime security across the region. If this can be developed as a cooperative regional endeavor, our capacity to develop and enforce effective maritime governance would be significantly strengthened.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Why Australia and Japan Must Lead in Capacity Building in Southeast Asia

By Aaron Magunna⁴

Southeast Asian countries continue to face various maritime policy challenges. Beijing's aggressive conduct toward other littoral states in the South China Sea and increased China-US tensions have highlighted the pervasiveness of traditional security threats while prospects for a more stable maritime order are undermined by the stalled negotiations between China and the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) over a Code of Conduct for the South China Sea. Regional countries are also concerned about issues such as piracy and armed robbery at sea, the effects of the climate crisis, and illegal, unreported, and undocumented (IUU) fishing, which is estimated to cost ASEAN members up to \$6 billion annually. Notably, these challenges are not solely linked to narrow maritime security issues but broader maritime governance capabilities, meaning the "capacity to enforce the framework of laws, regulations, policies, and institutions generated both within the legal jurisdictions of states and the international community." As the new Trump administration has shifted US policy on aid, countries like Australia and Japan will have to increasingly step up in the delivery of maritime capacity-building programs in Southeast Asia.

The American reduction in the capacity-building space creates a vacuum in Southeast Asia and beyond. In an effort to reduce government spending, the Trump administration has severely reduced funding for the U.S. Agency for International Development. If Australia and Japan want to sustain progress toward a safer, more orderly maritime domain, other actors will have to step up. This is also an opportunity for Canberra and Tokyo to gain some of the benefits associated with regional leadership. The current debate on aid in the United States does not detract from aid remaining a key foreign policy tool through which donor countries can project influence and power. In Southeast Asia, increasing aid in response to the shifts in Washington will primarily fall to the United States' most important allies in the region: Australia and Japan.

Although advanced regional economies have long provided maritime capacity-building programs in Southeast Asia, the policy priorities outlined in these programs frequently do not align with the priorities of program recipients. Driven by its concerns regarding China, the United States bolstered its military-to-military cooperation with regional countries such as Indonesia in recent years.

[4] Aaron Magunna is a PhD candidate at the University of Queensland, an Honorary Fellow at the Perth USAsia Centre, and a Research Associate at the Second Cold War Observatory.

However, non-military actors in the Indonesian state apparatus were more focused on other maritime governance challenges, including IUU fishing. Regional disputes with China were also not prioritized by former President Joko Widodo, more commonly known as Jokowi. This has continued under Jokowi's successor Prabowo Subianto. Simply put, US aid delivery prioritized maritime security over maritime governance whereas regional states frequently prioritize governance capabilities over security capacities.

As such, Australia and Japan should leverage current trends to refine regional capacity-building programs in ways that better strengthen the autonomous capabilities of regional countries to respond to various challenges, including, but not restricted to, Chinese behavior. Australia and Japan are already well-positioned to further refine the programs on offer. Improving the alignment of capacity-building initiatives with the policy priorities of recipients will bolster the regional maritime governance architecture in two ways. First, strengthening regional autonomous capacities would weaken China's ability to consolidate control in regional waters and thereby undermine the maritime security order that has been in place since 1945. Second, Australia and Japan enhancing aid cooperation efforts would bolster their respective relationships with regional countries and strengthen regional stability at a time when the reliability of Washington is more questionable than ever.

The capacities provided by Australia and Japan, conversely, are arguably already more aligned with the priorities of regional states. That said, the two states could do more in three key areas: IUU fishing, maritime infrastructure development, and climate change resilience.

As noted, IUU fishing presents a major economic problem for ASEAN states that is aggravated by the IUU fishing activities of China's distant-water fleets. Australian and Japanese support for IUU fishing programs has been limited, even as Australia has increased funding in this domain in recent years. As such, both parties could expand technical assistance, training, and resources for fisheries enforcement agencies while providing satellite-based maritime surveillance programs that help monitor IUU activities and assist Southeast Asian states in drafting stronger frameworks to prosecute violators more effectively. In Australia, these policy efforts could be led and coordinated by the Australian Maritime Border Command and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. In Japan, Coast Guard units and the Maritime Self-Defence Force could collaborate on this.

Another key area in which greater alignment is required is cooperation on maritime infrastructure. China has emerged as a major investor in ports and maritime industries in the region. In response, Australia and Japan should consider launching an alternative maritime infrastructure development fund to support port modernization and inter-island shipping. This could partially be financed via low-interest loans for ASEAN states to build up fishing ports, cold storage facilities, and coastal resilience projects. Such an initiative could also be integrated into existing policy efforts of Japanese development financing as well as Australia's Partnership for Infrastructure.

Lastly, Australia and Japan should more actively support Southeast Asia's environmental protection and climate resilience measures. Southeast Asian countries are concerned about the variegated effects of the climate catastrophe, including rising sea levels, coral reef degradation, and plastic pollution. Australia and Japan could expand funding for coastal resilience projects, introduce improved maritime pollution monitoring programs to detect illegal waste dumping and oil spills, and provide technology transfers for sustainable fisheries management, such as AI-based fish stock assessments and climate adaptation programs for fishing communities. This is especially important as the United States withdraws its support for global environment protect activities.

Ultimately, adding to existing maritime capacity-building efforts by further prioritizing IUU fishing, maritime infrastructure development, and environmental protection efforts would bolster the autonomous capabilities of regional states while serving the long-term strategic objectives of Australia and Japan. At a time when aid deliveries have become more politically contentious, policymakers should remind themselves that aid is almost never solely altruistic – in the end, it benefits donor countries as well. As the United States and the world changes, Australia and Japan will have to step up and assume a greater role in aiding maritime governance capacity-building efforts in Southeast Asia.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated Fishing in the Indian Ocean Region

By Abhimanyu Singh⁵

Lines between traditional and non-traditional threats are diminishing, which has only heightened complexities for maritime security forces. While major maritime threats such as piracy, maritime terrorism, and smuggling are being countered by both regional and extra-regional forces in the Indian Ocean Region (IOR), complex threats such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing (IUU) have largely remained unacknowledged as offenders skillfully exploit regulatory gaps and evade enforcement. Regional cooperation can address this problem at a relatively low cost, and this action should be taken before the problem becomes even more harmful to regional prosperity and environmental health.

IUU Fishing – The Rising Threat

The United Nations 2030 Sustainable Development Goal number 14 focuses on the conservation and sustainable use of marine resources. Presently, one-fifth of the global fish catch comes from IUU fishing, accounting for a "loss of 11–26 million tonnes of fish each year" and a financial loss estimated to range between \$10 and \$30 billion annually. Adding to the problem, the IUU fishing phenomenon has wider linkages to transnational organized crime multiplying the impact of related illegal activities such as contraband smuggling, human trafficking, and labor law violations. Thus, IUU fishing has become a rising priority for maritime law enforcement authorities (MLEAs) across the globe.

IUU Fishing in IOR

As a significant maritime region, the IOR remains equally affected by IUU fishing. According to www.globalfishingwatch.org for the period between 2014 through 2024, the data reveals an approximately four-fold increase (from 187.1 to 716.1 million hours) in Fishing Vessel Presence in IOR from 2014 to 2024; the Apparent Fishing Efforts in IOR has seen an eight-fold increase (8.6 to 74 million hours).

International Regulatory Framework

IUU fishing is currently regulated under a latticework of international treaties, governance rules, and protocols that include the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), UN Fish Stock Agreement, FAO Port State Measures Agreement, and various regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs).

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Concurrently, coastal nations have their domestic legislation, regulations, and policies to govern fishing in their waters and by their vessels. Specific to the IOR, the Indian Ocean Tuna Commission (IOTC), Southern Indian Ocean Fisheries Agreement (SIOFA), South West Indian Ocean Fisheries Commission (SWIOFC), and Commission for the Conservation of Southern Bluefin Tuna (CCSBT) are four RFMOs that offer additional rules, regulations, and cooperative avenues.

IUU Fishing Trend in IOR

While the IOTC and CCSBT regulate highly migratory species (e.g., tuna and tuna-like species), SIOFA and SWIOFC regulate non-highly migratory species (e.g., squid and squid-like species). Concerning IUU fishing of non-highly migratory species in IOR, it has been observed that geographically a gap exists in IOR that is not regulated by any RFMO. Quarterly data (Jan – Mar 2024) as published by the Information Fusion Centre – Indian Ocean Region supports this hypothesis thereby indicating heavy presence of vessels utilised for fishing squid and squid-like species in the Northwest IOR.

Proposed Way Ahead

A Sanskrit verse, Shloka “साधनं साध्यमैच्छेत् कृतकमफलप्रदः।” states that focusing on consistent, small, simple and straightforward efforts can lead to successful outcomes. Accordingly, effectively combating the menace of IUU fishing could be improved by following three practical strategies.

Creation and Extension of RFMOs in IOR

First, regional fisheries management organizations have emerged as the most effective mode of regulating IUU fishing with legal validation from various international instruments including UNCLOS. Thus, the Northwest IOR gap area could be regulated by either extending the Area of Competence of SIOFA to the gap area or through the creation of a new RFMO to regulate squid or squid-like species by consensus of the region's coastal countries. Although this could be a long process, it would ensure an effective regulatory regime for sustainable fishing in the gap area in line with UN Sustainable Development Goals.

High Seas Boarding and Inspection (HSBI) Schemes

Second, high seas boarding and inspection schemes (HSBI) strengthen enforcement of conservation measures by allowing maritime law enforcement authority personnel of all member countries to board and inspect fishing vessels belonging to other member states of that RFMO. Presently, except SIOFA, none of the other RFMOs (IOTC, SWIOFC, or CCSBT) have such an HSBI scheme. With the member nations that are part of IOTC, SWIOFC or CCSBT, having already accepted HSBI in SIOFA, they would surely be supportive of the incorporation of HSBI in these other RFMOs.

Ship-Rider Agreements

Third, ship-rider agreements allow for MLEA personnel of one country to board and operate from MLEA vessels of another country or set of countries. Such agreements presently exist in other areas, such as the Pacific Islands, and have proved themselves particularly advantageous in regions comprising of nations having limited capability to counter the menace of maritime crimes including IUU fishing. In the IOR, ship-rider agreements are something that small island nations, like Seychelles and Mauritius, could leverage the existing enforcement and surveillance capabilities of major maritime forces in the IOR. Countering IUU fishing by formalizing bilateral or multilateral ship-rider agreements in IOR would act as a deterrent and enhance regional cooperation without requiring any major regulatory and policy reforms.

In conclusion, IUU fishing is a multifaceted threat with regulatory loopholes and enforcement deficiencies. It poses severe risks not only to regional economic stability but also to ecological sustainability. Toward countering this threat, IOR states need to navigate through complex framework of international as well as regional instruments. In doing so, the low-cost, cooperative measures suggested above reflect a pragmatic path forward. By aligning regional collaboration with existing international frameworks, the IOR can craft a resilient response to IUU fishing before its consequences become irreversible.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Indonesia's Pursuit of Effectiveness

By Sayed Fauzan Riyadi⁶

Indonesia, with its numerous islands and vast oceanic domain, plays a crucial role in shaping global maritime policies. From a historical perspective, a major success was its securing recognition as an archipelagic state in the 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), a move that strengthened both its sovereignty and set important principles of international maritime law. However, despite such achievements, Indonesia continues to face significant maritime governance issues including illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing, environmental degradation, smuggling, and piracy. Effective maritime governance requires balancing security, environmental protection, and economic growth, all within the broader framework of developing a sustainable blue economy. One of the most effective solutions to address these issues is improving maritime education across Indonesia. This will foster the necessary skills, understanding, and coordination to overcome three key challenges that define Indonesia's maritime governance: informality, illegality, and insularity.

Challenge to Indonesia's Maritime Governance

The informality arises from an overwhelming number of maritime regulations, often created by different institutions with little coordination. This results in inefficiencies, conflicting rules, and enforcement gaps. Even when laws are strictly followed, loopholes remain, weakening governance. Illegality thrives due to weak enforcement and corruption. Commercial actors frequently resort to bribery to bypass regulatory hurdles while officials manipulate legal frameworks to justify selective enforcement. This creates a hierarchy of issues where certain problems are ignored in favor of more politically convenient ones. As a result, unsafe ships continue to operate, IUU fishing persists, and corrupt port management raises business costs. Lastly, insularity describes how Indonesia's maritime institutions operate in silos, prioritizing their own mandates over collective problem-solving. Instead of uniting under a strong enforcement body, agencies compete for influence, which hinders effective governance.

President Joko Widodo's failure to implement his signature Global Maritime Fulcrum (GMF) policy highlights these structural problems. For example, that policy initially aimed to centralize enforcement under BAKAMLA, Indonesia's maritime security agency, but that portion of the policy effort was derailed by bureaucratic resistance, leaving the agency with limited power.

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Without genuine institutional reform and cross-agency cooperation, Indonesia's maritime governance will remain fragmented. While international partnerships have provided training and resources, they have unintentionally reinforced agency silos rather than promoting collaboration.

Strengthening Maritime Governance Through Education

A long-term yet crucial solution to Indonesia's maritime governance challenges lies in education. While policy reforms and institutional restructuring may offer immediate relief, they do not address the root of the problem: the mindset and capabilities of those managing Indonesia's maritime sector. To move beyond fragmented governance and entrenched corruption, Indonesia must invest in developing a new generation of maritime professionals who understand the complexities of integrated governance, environmental responsibility, and ethical leadership.

One key area for improvement is embedding maritime education into Indonesia's national curriculum. Despite being an archipelagic nation, the country's education system has historically placed little emphasis on maritime affairs. This disengagement leaves young Indonesians unaware of their nation's maritime potential and challenges. Introducing maritime studies early on, through history, science, and civics classes, can help develop a sense of ownership and responsibility for the country's waters and resources. Beyond general awareness, practical engagement — such as conservation programs, coastal clean-ups, and school partnerships with maritime institutions — can foster an early connection to maritime governance and sustainability.

Vocational and professional training is equally important. Indonesia's maritime workforce — fishermen, port operators, and law enforcement officers — must be equipped with not only technical skills but also a strong understanding of governance frameworks, sustainability, and regulatory compliance. Many officers currently learn governance structures and enforcement mechanisms on the job, leading to inconsistencies. Standardized cross-agency training programs would strengthen coordination and reduce interagency governance gaps. Strengthening vocational schools and polytechnics to include governance and environmental training is a necessary step to ensuring that those working in the sector understand and uphold best practices.

Higher education also plays a crucial role in shaping maritime governance. Universities must expand their maritime studies programs to incorporate global best practices and real-world case studies. Collaborations with international institutions would expose students to governance models from other archipelagic nations. Additionally, leadership development programs, such as scholarships, exchange initiatives, and fellowships, can help develop future maritime policymakers and industry leaders who are not only technically proficient but also resistant to corruption and institutional insularity.

Another major challenge in Indonesia's maritime governance is the lack of cooperation between institutions. To address this, Indonesia should establish a national maritime leadership academy to train mid-career professionals from different agencies in a collaborative environment. This would encourage cross-agency networking and cooperation before individuals ascend to leadership roles. The academy could host joint exercises, policy simulations, and crisis management training to foster a culture of unity and shared responsibility.

Beyond formal education, Indonesia must leverage digital technology to enhance maritime governance education and transparency. A maritime governance resource center should be developed as an online platform offering open-access research, policy updates, and real-time governance data. This digital hub would provide training materials and regulatory information, making knowledge accessible to policymakers, researchers, and maritime professionals. A key feature of this platform should be a Maritime Governance Index, similar to the Maritime Security Index by StableSeas, which would assess Indonesia's performance based on maritime security, regulatory effectiveness, environmental sustainability, economic utilization, and institutional transparency. By tracking these indicators, Indonesia could measure progress, identify weaknesses, and drive evidence-based policymaking.

Additionally, the resource center could offer online training programs, webinars, and certification courses, ensuring continuous learning for maritime professionals without the constraints of physical training facilities. This would help address the challenge of capacity-building in remote regions, allowing individuals from all parts of Indonesia to access high-quality governance education.

Ultimately, reforming maritime governance requires more than just policy shifts. It demands a transformation in how Indonesians perceive and manage their maritime domain. Education, whether through national schooling, vocational training, university programs, leadership development, or digital resources, provides the most sustainable path to long-term improvement. By investing in education at all levels, Indonesia can cultivate a new generation of professionals committed to collaborative, transparent, and effective maritime governance. Though the results may not be immediate, they represent the best strategy for overcoming past inefficiencies and positioning Indonesia as a true maritime powerhouse.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Developing a National Unified Maritime Strategy for Japan

By Yuki Bito⁷

Japan makes securing sea lanes of communication (SLOCs) a critical national priority as its maritime transportation accounts for 99.6% of the trade volume as of 2023. Moreover, Japan has played a pivotal role as a maritime nation. Despite this emphasis on securing SLOCs, Japan still lacks strategic communication about its foreign policy priorities. Japan needs to more clearly articulate its strategic ends, ways, and means in the Indo-Pacific Region.

Strategic communication uses words, actions, or images to achieve foreign and security policy and impact the target audience's decision making and behavior. However, Japan's current strategic communication is incoherent. For example, while former Prime Minister Shinzo Abe first mentioned the "Confluence of the Two Seas" in 2007 and following the "Free and Open Indo-Pacific" (FOIP) vision exemplifies how strategic messaging can promote regional countries' efforts, Japan explicitly names China as a challenge without clearly defining the desired regional order. Furthermore, Japan revised the FOIP plan in 2023 to address the lack of a universally acceptable vision for the international order. Thus, Japan has struggled to communicate its intent.

This contradiction and the absence of an explicit statement of its objectives with aligned narratives and actions cause Japan to be misunderstood by allies and partners and lose influence in shaping regional stability. Therefore, Japan must develop and communicate a national unified maritime strategy that integrates the capabilities of the Japan Maritime Self-Defense Force (JMSDF) and the Japan Coast Guard (JCG).

Why Japan's Strategic Communication Suffers

First, due to the absence of clear "ends," Japan has not clearly defined an international order it seeks to promote in the Indo-Pacific region. While Japan reaffirms FOIP's principles of "freedom," "openness," "diversity," "inclusiveness," and the "rule of law," it leaves these ideals abstract — devoid of concrete goals that lead to tangible outcomes for regional countries. For example, while the National Security Strategy 2022 explicitly names China as a challenge that attempts to change the status quo, it fails to explain what a status quo is or to show its end state. Another example is Japan's confidence-building activities, which are rooted in an idea to reduce the military threat.

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These activities would be ineffective as regional nations cannot understand Japan's strategic goals for using them and the shared idea of end states. Thus, even allies' strategic planners in the United States insufficiently understand Japan's goals and capabilities. Furthermore, small maritime nations such as those in the Pacific Islands are wary that the great power competition could lead to regional instability.

Second, due to an inadequacy of linkages in “ways,” some gaps exist between Japan's actions and messaging. For instance, the JMSDF's deployments, like Indo-Pacific Deployment (IPD), are widely publicized and highly regarded but face criticism from China, which claims these deployments endanger regional security. Also, the JCG plays a vital role in realizing the FOIP with the protection of SLOCs through capacity-building support, mainly for Southeast Asia. However, the JCG has never explained how these activities contribute to regional stability in a strategic framework. These gaps limit Japan's ability to influence allies and partners and competing against narratives like the Belt and Road Initiative.

Finally, due to an impetus toward peace because of Japan's constitution, Japan has not been able to utilize its advanced maritime assets in an integrated manner (“means”). Since World War II, Japan has adhered to the 1947 Constitution, maintaining an exclusive defense posture under civilian control and observing the Three Non-Nuclear Principles. Japan also ensures it does not become a military power that threatens other countries. Indeed, Japan even took issue with the headline,

“Prime Minister Fumio Kishida is turning a once pacifist Japan into a military power.” Also, the JCG is committed to its exclusive roles as a law enforcement agency under the Ministry of Land, Infrastructure, Transport, and Tourism instead of the Ministry of Defense. Thus, the JMSDF and JCG are separate services with unique missions and cultures. According to the “JCG Control Guideline,” even if the Minister of Defense were to gain control over the JCG in a contingency (something that has never happened), the JCG would not be incorporated into the JMSDF. Such a discrete approach weakens Japan's ability to respond to contingencies or its influence in the region.

Japan Should Develop a National Unified Maritime Strategy among the JMSDF and JCG

Japan must develop and communicate a national unified maritime strategy that integrates the capabilities of the JMSDF and JCG. The strategy must include a shared perception of ends, ways, and means.

Japan must clearly state its “ends” for FOIP, which is that securing the SLOCs is an essential national priority, and subsequently, promoting a rules-based maritime order that respects sovereignty and free access to and activities in the ocean.

The JMSDF and JCG should explicitly state shared perspectives on deterrence in the strategy to create potent “ways” by aligning actions with narratives. Even though the JCG has never defined deterrence clearly, the JMSDF and JCG should focus on deterrence through high-profile deployments and cooperative operations such as IPD and counter-piracy operations. Also, they should expand initiatives such as capacity-building with regional countries to contribute to stability under the FOIP principles.

To maximize maritime capabilities, Japan must integrate its maritime assets effectively (“means”). Also, the government must address the institutional barriers between the JMSDF and JCG through greater coordination. As 80 years have passed since the end of World War II, fewer senior JCG officers express their aversion toward the JMSDF as the successor to the former Imperial Japanese Navy.

Japan can benefit from developing and communicating a national unified maritime strategy. With a clear articulation of ends, ways, and means, Japan can demonstrate consistency in words and actions and strengthen its credibility among allies and partners. Also, Japan will build stronger partnerships for regional stability by presenting itself as a “thought leader” with a consistent vision for FOIP. Notably, Japan can strike a delicate balance between promoting cooperation and sending the signals necessary for deterrence. Finally, Japan can maximize its resources to secure the SLOCs and free access to the ocean.

Conclusion

Japan must develop a national unified maritime strategy and communicate its ends, ways, and means, which secures the SLOCs and promotes regional stability. The strategy would enable the alignment of JMSDF defense capabilities with JCG law enforcement expertise and the development of effective Japan’s strategic communication. Japan must stop behaving like a “nation that pleases everyone” and become a “thought leader” in the Indo-Pacific region.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Integrating Whole-of-Government and Nation Approaches in the Philippines

By Ivy Ganadillo⁸

The Philippines faces mounting challenges in its maritime domain. This includes geopolitical tensions, criminal activities, environmental degradation, and socio-economic vulnerabilities in coastal communities. Institutional fragmentation and outdated policies further complicate these issues by hindering effective governance. To address these pressing concerns, revising and modernizing the National Maritime Security Policy and Strategy (NMSPP) is more than an administrative necessity. It is a strategic imperative. This policy overhaul can serve as the foundation for safeguarding maritime sovereignty, fostering innovation in ocean-based industries, and ensuring the sustainability of the Philippines' critical marine ecosystems.

As an archipelagic nation with over 7,600 islands, the Philippines' strategic location amplifies its vulnerability to maritime challenges. Competing territorial claims in the West Philippine/South China Sea strain limited resources, while illegal fishing, marine pollution, piracy, smuggling, and human trafficking are just some of the many threats that pose risks to both national security and livelihoods. The NMSPP, previously known as the National Marine Policy (NMP), was designed as a framework for integrating maritime issues into the national agenda. However, it has struggled to keep pace with evolving realities. In 2024, President Ferdinand R. Marcos Jr. issued Executive Order No. 57 (EO 57), which renamed and reorganized the National Coast Watch System into the National Maritime Council (NMC), reflecting the administration's intent to unify governance. However, realizing this vision demands a comprehensive update to the NMSPP.

Challenges in Maritime Governance

Maritime governance in the Philippines faces systemic issues, including siloed agency mandates, inter-agency rivalries, weak enforcement mechanisms, and chronic underfunding. Limited maritime domain awareness, stemming from the prioritization of land development, leaves the country vulnerable to external threats such as maritime and territorial disputes, illegal fishing, and marine pollution. Climate change further exacerbates these vulnerabilities, with rising sea temperatures and environmental disturbances threatening marine ecosystems and coastal resilience.

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The economic potential of the ocean economy remains underutilized, contributing only 3.9% to the Gross Domestic Product in 2023. Ocean-based industries, including fishing, sea transportation, power generation, and coastal tourism, suffer from inadequate investment and policy support. For instance, the Philippine fishing fleet decreased significantly between 2018 and 2022, with most vessels unsuitable for offshore fishing. This decline undermines food security, diminishes employment opportunities, and weakens the country's competitiveness in regional fisheries while reducing its presence in resource-rich, disputed waters. Additionally, access to natural gas reserves within territorial waters is restricted. The inability to access these resources intensifies the urgency for alternative energy solutions.

Coastal communities bear the brunt of these problems. Despite being key contributors to the ocean economy, fisherfolk remain among the poorest sectors, highlighting a pressing need for livelihood diversification and resource management reforms. Unregulated marine pollution exacerbates these vulnerabilities, posing threats to biodiversity and human health. Pollutants, including plastics and agricultural runoff, severely impact marine habitats, diminishing fisheries and coastal ecosystems.

Without unified governance, critical ecosystems remain under threat, and marine resources are underutilized, further jeopardizing the livelihoods of coastal populations. Addressing these complexities demands an approach integrating environmental sustainability, economic resilience, and national security.

Policy Recommendations

The Philippines needs a holistic approach to its maritime governance framework. Its policies must transcend rhetorical commitments and embody the nation's identity as a maritime and archipelagic state through genuine collaboration with all sectors of society. The revision of the NMSPP must align with the Philippine Development Plan (PDP) 2023–2028 and the National Security Policy (NSP) 2023–2028. This integration will ensure that maritime concerns are not peripheral but central to national development and security. Key recommendations include modernizing institutions, engaging communities, investing in industries, and strengthening international partnerships to ensure sustainable and resilient maritime policies.

EO 57 expanded the NMC's membership and critical support agencies, adding several institutions, including the National Intelligence Coordinating Agency, the Office of the Solicitor General, and the University of the Philippines' Institute for Maritime Affairs and Law of the Sea. While these changes are positive, further expansion of inter-agency collaboration is vital. To enhance the integration of research, policy, and operations, involving the Department of Science and Technology and the University of the Philippines Marine Science Institute can bring evidence-based insights into ocean sustainability, resource management, climate resilience, and marine-related technological innovations. Additionally, establishing a centralized data-sharing system can improve maritime domain awareness and support strategic decision-making.

Broad-based consultations with local communities, social scientists, and private organizations are essential to ensuring that policies are inclusive and reflective of diverse perspectives. Fisherfolk's practical insights can complement climate data from scientists to co-create effective policies. Supporting alternative livelihoods like sustainable tourism and aquaculture can address seasonal fishing challenges and mitigate environmental threats. Awareness campaigns targeting schools, local governments, and businesses can foster long-term stewardship of marine ecosystems.

Modernizing and expanding the fishing fleet is essential to support livelihoods and ensure sustainable fishing. Investing in the shipbuilding sector to manufacture durable vessels for fishermen will enhance their safety and resilience against severe weather while asserting sovereign rights over disputed maritime areas. In addition, programs to improve fishing equipment and provide training in sustainable techniques can empower coastal communities and ensure the long-term viability of marine resources.

Pursuing and supporting alternative energy sources, such as offshore wind, and marine solar, wave, and tidal motion energy, can address economic and energy security challenges. Several potential sites characterized by strong tidal currents in various straits of the Visayas and Mindanao regions are ideal for implementing such projects. These initiatives will not only enhance energy security but also position the Philippines as a frontrunner in sustainable ocean-based industries.

Strengthening partnerships with international and regional organizations, and strategic partners such as the Association for Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), Australia, Japan, and the alliance with the United States can enhance collaborative solutions to maritime challenges. Better coordination of coalitions on overseas development assistance can prevent overlap, ensuring resources are directed toward urgent needs. Expanding multilateral maritime cooperation and supporting international treaties that promote a rules-based order can enhance maritime governance, security, and coordination. Bolstering such initiatives can also attract funding and technical assistance for capacity-building programs, ensuring more effective responses to broader maritime concerns.

The Philippines is at a critical juncture in its journey toward effective maritime governance. While institutional reforms represent progress, their impact will remain limited without a strong, cohesive policy framework. Revising the National Maritime Security Policy and Strategy is essential for safeguarding maritime sovereignty and sustainably managing ocean resources. Adopting a whole-of-government and nation approach is imperative to address complex challenges and advance long-term interests.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Using Regional Maritime Information Sharing Centers to Form a Global Network

By De Xian Chong⁹

Since the concept was first introduced in the early 2000s, the concept of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) has become widely recognized as an important enabler for maritime security at the state and regional levels. A distinct manifestation of this development is the proliferation of a network of regional information sharing centers (ISCs) globally. While their mandates and set-ups vary, these ISCs have been instrumental in facilitating effective MDA through the collecting and consolidation of information from diverse sources and encouraging collaboration between maritime stakeholders. While the ISCs remain a critical component of regional MDA architectures, changes such as the development of new technologies and the growing prevalence of minilateral cooperation are challenging the established MDA norms and practices. It is therefore pertinent that ISCs are able to embrace these changes and continue to evolve accordingly. To do so, this paper advocates for the creation of a permanent forum for regional ISCs, to serve as a dedicated space for dialogue and discussion to improve operational challenges and exchanging best practices for the benefit of regional and even international maritime governance.

Presently, efforts to strengthen operational linkages and cooperation between regional ISCs are predominantly bilateral. No persistent platform exists for regional ISCs to convene and discuss such issues collectively. The United Nations Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC) Global Maritime Crime Programme's (GMCP) Forum of National Maritime Fusion Centres (FNMFC) represents the closest example of such an arrangement, but its focus is limited to national-level or agency-led ISCs within the Southeast Asian region. Having a dedicated platform similar to the FNMFC for regional ISCs around the world will allow for a focused agenda on regional maritime security and governance issues.

Even though the regional ISCs are primarily maritime security outfits, their *raison d'être* as information nodes in enhancing MDA provides outsized benefits for all stakeholders, as the operational experiences and maritime data collated by the ISCs can serve to inform policymakers on a wide range of maritime issues that have ramifications beyond the realm of national security.

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Providing a platform for ISCs to collectively highlight pertinent maritime issues will also help to shine the spotlight on potential areas of improvement and correspondingly generate greater interest and attention for the betterment of maritime governance. Having a permanent and dedicated forum will also facilitate better follow-through, ensuring collaborative efforts between the ISCs is sustainable and reviewed regularly.

Looking ahead to the next phase of MDA, scholars have already suggested ways ISCs might move beyond the monitoring and exchanging of information on conventional maritime security issues such as piracy and sea robbery, illegal human migration, or contraband smuggling to include emerging risk areas such as maritime cybercrimes and critical underwater infrastructure protection. There is also increasing discussion about how to include sub-surface and atmospheric elements within MDA pictures. As the mandate and scope of MDA efforts continue to grow, so too will the associated technologies and resources required to support them.

Scholars have also raised alternatives to the current ISC-centric model, arguing that a pan-regional info-sharing platform will perhaps better serve the MDA needs of stakeholders and citing inefficiencies in the physical deployment of liaison officers to ISCs. Regional ISCs should therefore ensure that they are plugged into these conversations and explore opportunities to review and refresh their mandates and operational focus areas accordingly. Regional ISCs are well-positioned to do so, as they were established expressly to facilitate cooperation through the exchange of non-sensitive information, and their existing linkages, mutual goodwill, and trust established over the years can easily be leveraged to promote better maritime cooperation and governance.

The non-sensitive information exchange at the ISCs also exists to enable cooperation at the operational level. This allows linkages to be maintained even if stakeholders may not enjoy strategic political alignment. The transnational nature of maritime threats and the porosity of maritime boundaries necessitate such arrangements to sustain good order at sea despite strategic differences between stakeholders.

Additionally, the regional ISCs are well-suited to ensure multilateral cooperation can be sustained amidst the growing prevalence of minilateral arrangements that may be perceived to isolate or exclude certain parties. Regional ISCs are also well-placed to serve as testbeds for new collaborative technologies and as an equalizer to bridge resource gaps for developing states, allowing them to share and benefit from the latest MDA developments as well.

The establishment of a permanent forum for regional ISCs therefore represents a natural next step for regional ISCs to collectively enhance MDA efforts. Following a formal agreement signed in 2022 between the Information Fusion Centre and UNODC GMCP, the two agencies co-hosted the Head of Centres Meeting under the ambit of the FNMPC earlier in June 2024. This effort provides an existing experience amongst regional ISCs where a permanent forum could become a reality. Regional ISCs should therefore take advantage of this low-hanging fruit that will provide a potentially high-profile permanent platform for regional ISCs that can bring outsized benefits towards regional maritime security and governance.

Navigating Indo-Pacific Waters: Maritime Governance and Strengthening ASEAN-IORA Cooperation Through Port Connectivity

By Pham Ngoc Minh Trang¹⁰

The Indo-Pacific's dense shipping traffic has made the region vulnerable to severe vessel-sourced pollution threatening marine ecosystems and coastal economies. A striking example is the catastrophic oil spill in the waters of Mauritius, which underscored the urgent need for greater international cooperation to combat pollution from ships in the region. The Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and the Indian Ocean Rim Association (IORA) play key roles in addressing these challenges, leveraging their strategic positions to advance regional ocean governance. Their commitment to a sustainable blue economy was reinforced by the signing of the 2023 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU), which prioritizes maritime safety and pollution control. These objectives also align with the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) and the IORA Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (IOIP), both emphasizing cooperation under a rules-based framework, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). An avenue on port connectivity focusing on port state jurisdiction provisions of UNCLOS would be a solution for vessel-sourced pollution and additional protections for the Indo-Pacific's marine environment.

Legal Framework for Combating Ship Pollution

The majority of ASEAN and IORA member states are parties to UNCLOS, making it the most authoritative legal framework for their cooperation in addressing vessel-sourced pollution. The Convention establishes three primary enforcement approaches: flag state, coastal state, and port state jurisdiction. Articles 217 and 220 grant flag states — the state under whose flag a ship is registered — and coastal states — the state within whose maritime zones a ship is navigating — the power to enforce environmental regulations and take action against polluting vessels. However, these enforcement mechanisms have notable limitations. The effectiveness of flag state jurisdiction is often undermined by the widespread use of "flags of convenience," where ships register under states with weak regulatory oversight, reducing accountability for environmental violations. The coastal states often have insufficient enforcement resources to cover vast sea areas. Additionally, coastal state jurisdiction, particularly under Article 220, does not explicitly grant enforcement powers for coastal states over foreign vessels that pollute its territorial sea but then relocate to their Exclusive Economic Zone. These gaps highlight the need for ASEAN and IORA countries to explore alternative enforcement mechanisms to protect the marine environment in the Indo-Pacific. Port state jurisdiction offers the best solution for such problems.

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Port Connectivity Based on Port State Jurisdiction as the Key Solution

Ports serve as key entry points to a country, making them crucial for verifying a ship's compliance with international standards on seaworthiness, maritime safety, and marine environmental protection. Furthermore, UNCLOS not only empowers port states to control pollution from vessels but also facilitates cooperation among relevant states to address this issue effectively. Port states are authorized under UNCLOS (Article 211) to adopt laws and regulations aimed at preventing, reducing, and controlling pollution from vessels. These laws can include measures regulating the entry and departure of ships from their ports. In addition, Article 218 of UNCLOS grants port states broad enforcement jurisdiction, allowing them to board, inspect, detain, and impose penalties on foreign vessels that violate international environmental regulations, even if the infringement occurred in another state's maritime zones. Those measures can be carried out based on the evidence obtained by the port state or based on the request of the flag state of the vessel or the state that is affected by the violation. More importantly, port states can also bring the ship before its domestic court for any judicial proceedings upon the request of the flag state or the affected state.

The provisions above underscore the port state's significant role in protecting the marine environment. By effectively implementing port state jurisdiction, states can mitigate the limitations of flag state and coastal state enforcement jurisdiction.

Challenges and Current Gaps in Implementation in the Indo-Pacific

ASEAN and IORA member states, however, have not fully implemented their port state power. On the one hand, those countries established several measures regulating the entry and leaving of ships at their ports. For instance, Section 23 of Singapore's Prevention of Pollution of the Sea Act 1990 stipulates that if the director or port master has reasonable grounds to believe a ship intending to enter the port does not comply with the Act or its regulations, they may deny the ship entry. Similarly, Article 98 of Vietnam's Maritime Code 2015 states that a ship may not be permitted to leave a seaport if it fails to meet the required standards for maritime safety or environmental pollution prevention. Some member states of both organisations have also joined two regional mechanisms related to port state control measures: the Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control in the Asia-Pacific (Tokyo MOU) and the Indian Ocean Memorandum of Understanding on Port State Control (Indian Ocean MOU).

On the other hand, the power to initiate legal proceedings against foreign ships under Port State jurisdiction provided in Article 218 of UNCLOS has been overlooked by ASEAN and IORA Member States as rarely do they implement the rules made by their domestic legislation. While this enforcement power is discretionary rather than a binding obligation under international law, it serves as a crucial mechanism to address the shortcomings of flag state and coastal state jurisdiction in combating vessel-source pollution. Given its potential to enhance maritime environmental protection, it is high time for the countries to consider applying it in practice.

Mutual Recognition of Port State Jurisdiction: Harmonizing Regulations

It is crucial for ASEAN and IORA member states to fully incorporate the port state powers under Article 218 of UNCLOS into their domestic legal systems. However, this process is complex and time-consuming. In the meantime, a more practical approach would be to focus on raising awareness and developing a comprehensive guideline on the issue. This could take the form of a multilateral memorandum of understanding, building on the commitments established in the 2023 ASEAN-IORA MoU. The proposed multilateral MOU should clearly define mechanisms for cooperation, including standardized procedures for investigating pollution incidents, detaining non-compliant vessels, and ensuring their timely release in accordance with international law.

By adopting a collaborative approach and effectively implementing UNCLOS, ASEAN and IORA member states can enhance their capacity to combat vessel-source pollution and protect the marine environment across the Indo-Pacific. More importantly, because not all ASEAN and IORA members participate in the Tokyo MOU or Indian Ocean MOU, a broader regional mechanism tailored to the Indo-Pacific context would ensure a more inclusive and effective system for the connectivity of ports based on port state jurisdiction.