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Issue 36, 2021

Maritime Security Cooperation in the Southeast Asia Region

By Commander Surachai Saiwongpanya, RTN

CMDR Saiwongpanya (Thailand) attended the Sea Power Centre of Australia as a Visiting Navy Fellow.

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Issue 36, 2021

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Aim

This paper investigates and explains the nature of Southeast Asian maritime security concerns. The paper considers national, bilateral, or multilateral security alternatives, and the feasibility of these alternatives.



Figure 1: HMAS Warramunga's Boarding Party approaches a dhow in international waters to conduct a boarding operation. Photographer: LSIS Tom Gibson.

The importance of Southeast Asian Sea Lines

In his important text, *Seapower*, Geoffrey Till reminds us that the sea has always been central to human development as a source of resources, and as a means of transportation, information exchange and strategic dominion. It has been the basis for our prosperity and security.¹

Till understands that maritime transport is especially important to driving the global economy. Commercial trade is essential to global connection and has traditionally had a significant impact on the sustainability of nation-states and, in particular, maritime governance. Shipping, being one of the world's largest sectors, serves as the backbone of globalisation. Therefore, all nations with a need for maritime transport routes focus on preserving the right to travel through waters in good faith and safety.



However, the good order which is fundamental to free and safe access to the global commons is undermined by several challenges; for example, terrorism, piracy and armed robbery at sea, human trafficking, weapons smuggling, drug smuggling and transnational crime linked by sea. These unconventional threats are especially problematic in Southeast Asia.

Southeast Asia is a region located between South Asia, China, Northern Australia and East Asia. Its area accounts for about 14% of Asia and 3% of the world. Southeast Asia is a region of great international political and security importance due to its location at the junction between the Indian and Pacific oceans. It is the major bloodline in the transportation of goods that connects the Western world with the East.²

Strait of Malacca

The significance of Southeast Asian sea lines of communication (SLOC) to the economies of existing and growing Asian nations is undeniable, and of critical importance for the world economy as a whole. The Strait of Malacca carries an especially significant volume of international marine traffic. The Malacca and Singapore Straits connect Europe, the Middle East, Africa, and East Asia. It is estimated that nearly 100,000 vessels pass through the Straits each year.³ The Strait of Malacca, which carries about one-third of the world's petroleum and other liquid cargo, is the shortest maritime route connecting the Middle East and Europe with the Asia Pacific. The next shortest alternative path adds three days of sea travel and hefty expense. Consequently, it is in the international community's best interests to keep the straits open, secure, and safe. Any disruptive incident can drastically interrupt commerce and result in severe expense.

Sulu and Celebes Seas

The Sulu and Celebes Seas are enormous bodies of water - about 100,000 square miles and 110,000 square miles, respectively. The Sulu Sea is bordered to the northwest by the Philippine island of Palawan, to the southeast by the Sulu Archipelago and in the southwest by the eastern Malaysian state of Sabah. The Celebes Sea is bounded to the north by the Sulu Archipelago and Mindanao, to the west by Sabah and the Indonesian province of Kalimantan, and to the south by Sulawesi. The maritime trade routes that bridge the two seas connect Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines, and are heavily used by international ships travelling between Australia and Southeast and Northeast Asia. Every year, an estimated \$40 billion in trade flows through the region.⁴



Part I - Maritime Security in Southeast Asia

Southeast Asia’s marine environment is dynamic. The region’s unique geography, including vital waterways such as the Malacca Strait, the Sunda Strait, the Lombok Strait, and the Singapore Strait - to mention a few - has made it significant in terms of world trade. The sea lanes and straits are located inside or astride geographical archipelagos occupied by dense populations. There is a plethora of narrow waterways, shallow reefs, and small islands suitable for piracy and other maritime crimes. Simultaneously, several key chokepoints make sea lines vulnerable to acts of terrorism.⁵

Piracy and Armed Robbery at Sea

According to annual statistics from the International Maritime Organization, since 2010 the incidents of piracy and armed robbery at sea in various locations across the world have been constant or falling.⁶ However, the number of incidents in the Malacca strait and South China Sea remain high.

YEARLY STATISTICS OF INCIDENTS WHICH OCCURRED SINCE 1984 (REGIONALLY AND GLOBALLY)

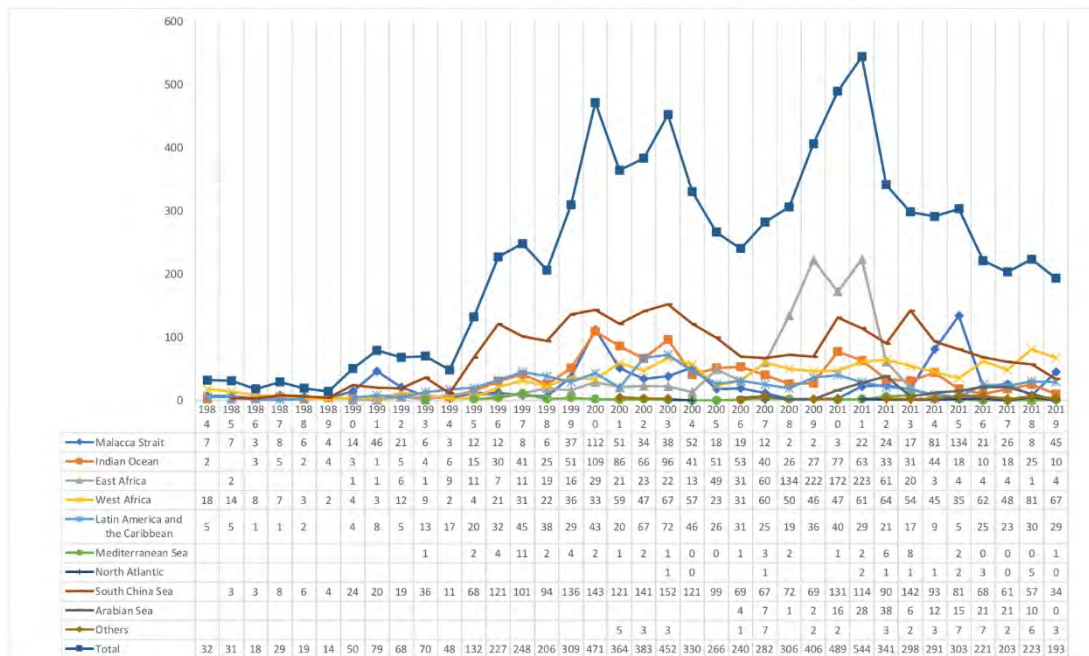


Figure 2: IMO yearly statistics of piracy and armed robbery against ships at sea, 1984-2019.

Furthermore, IMO statistics as shown in Figure 2 indicate that piracy and armed robbery at sea was clearly higher in the Malacca Strait and South China Sea than in other areas during 2019.



REGIONAL ANALYSIS OF REPORTS ON ACTS OF PIRACY AND ARMED ROBBERY AGAINST SHIPS WHICH WERE REPORTED TO HAVE BEEN ALLEGEDLY COMMITTED OR ATTEMPTED DURING 2019

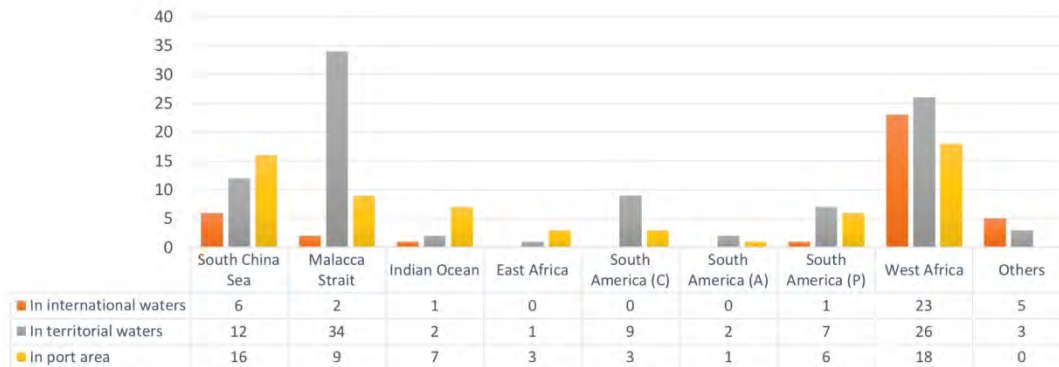


Figure 3: IMO piracy and armed robbery against ships at sea report, 2019.

According to the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, during 2010-2020 most of the piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia occurred in Southeast Asia.⁷

ReCAAP (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combatting Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia) is a multilateral agreement between 21 countries, which is significant as the first regional government-to-government agreement to defend against piracy and armed robbery against ships.



	2007		2008		2009		2010		2011		2012		2013		2014		2015		2016		2017		2018		2019		2020	
	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att	Act	Att
Southeast Asia																												
Andaman Sea																		1										
Gulf of Thailand						1																						
Indian Ocean															1													
Indonesia	33	7	20	1	14	6	36	10	47	2	66	6	83	7	42	5	22	1	32	30	3	21	6	18	5	21	1	
Malaysia	8	1	13		12	3	18		14	3	11		6		4	1	4		1	1	1	6		8		3		
Myanmar					1				1																			
Pacific Ocean																											1	
Philippines	5	1	6	2	4	1	5		4	2	3		5		5		7	1	3	19		8	1	5	2	13		
Singapore							2		3		2																	
South China Sea	1	5	6	2	11	2	18	8	12	6	7		8	1	40	2	10	1	4	1	11	1	3	1	1		3	1
SOMS	2	4	7	4	6	2	5	3	24	2	12	1	14		45	4	94	10	1	1	7	2	6	2	29	2	34	
Sri Lanka		1																										
Sulu-Celebes Seas																			12	6	3	4	2	1	2		1	
Thailand	1				2		1										1											
Vietnam	5		11	1	8		13		8		3	1	8	1	6		27		9	2		4		2		6		
Sub-total	55	19	63	10	58	14	99	21	113	15	104	8	124	9	142	13	166	13	62	8	73	11	50	11	65	10	81	2
Overall total	77	23	83	13	82	20	134	33	135	22	124	9	141	9	171	16	190	13	78	9	90	12	62	14	72	11	95	2

Location of Incidents (2007-2020)

Figure 4: ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC) incidents of piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia.

The data above demonstrates that Southeast Asia waterways have consistently placed high in terms of reported piracy and armed robbery at sea incidents.

Maritime Terrorism

Maritime terrorism is generating significant insecurity in Southeast Asia, since the majority of countries rely on seaborne trade. Due to the lack of a robust regional land transport infrastructure in Southeast Asia, trade states rely heavily on air and sea transportation. The massive expansion in the ship industry is mirrored in a significant increase in shipping activity, and in a heightened concern at the risk of maritime terrorism in Southeast Asia.

The threat of maritime terrorism began to cause increasing concern in the wake of 9/11. In March 2003, the Aegis Defense Services reported that the *Dewi Madrim*, an Indonesian chemical tanker, had been hijacked off the coast of Sumatra. The hijacking seemed to be the work of terrorists learning how to drive a ship in preparation for a future maritime assault.



The hijackers were fully equipped with weapons and assaulted the ship via the bridge rather than the safe room, and, instead of ransacking the crew's belongings, they maneuvered the ship for over an hour. Some news publications also compared the *Dewi Madrim* event to "Al-Qaeda terrorists who committed the September 11 attacks travelling to flight school in Florida".⁸

The presence of the criminal-terrorist Abu Sayyaf Group in the Sulu Archipelago has drawn international attention to the Sulu and Celebes Seas. Abu Sayyaf established ties with global terrorist organisations such as Jemaah Islamiyah and Al-Qaeda. During the early 2000s, the group conducted a series of kidnappings for ransom in Malaysian and Philippine beach resorts to raise cash for its activities. In February 2004, Abu Sayyaf claimed responsibility for the bombing of *Superferry 14*. The incident resulted in the loss of the ship and the death of 116 passengers and the wounding of about 300 others, which was considered the deadliest act of maritime terrorism to date. In July 2014, Abu Sayyaf pledged allegiance to the Middle East-based terrorist organisation Islamic State.⁹

Furthermore, from 2016 to 2018 Abu Sayyaf perpetrated a series of violent attacks against shipping. According to the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, in 2016 there were 12 actual and nine attempted attacks in the Sulu-Celebes Sea. In the 12 actual attacks a total of 61 crew members were abducted: 28 have been released (often following the payment of a ransom by the ship owner), 17 rescued, seven killed and nine are still held in captivity. From 2017 to 2020 the number of incidents declined but the threat remains active.¹⁰

The Nexus between Piracy and Terrorism

Southeast Asia has become the world's maritime terrorist flashpoint, due to the high frequency of piracy and the increasing threat of terrorism in recent years.

The menace of Southeast Asian piracy is exacerbated by indigenous terrorist organisations with strong maritime ties. Abu Sayyaf, the Moro Islamic Liberation Front, the Gerakan Aceh Merdeka, and the Jemaah Islamiyah are three Southeast Asian terrorist organisations with the competence and the will to conduct maritime terrorism. The increasing link between piracy and terrorism makes maritime terrorism a regional security issue in this region.¹¹

The security issue is compounded since many Southeast Asian countries are marine states. Pirates and terrorists find it easy to thrive in the region. Yet, the extent to which pirates and terrorists are likely to collaborate is debatable. Some experts have claimed that terrorists might learn from pirates by studying and mirroring their behaviours.



Others have speculated that pirates may work very closely with terrorists.¹² But pirates and terrorists are different. Pirates seek economic gain, whereas terrorists seek political gain. Terrorists might simulate pirate methods or pirate raids, but maritime terrorists are bent on terror as a political tool. Rather than hijacking a ship, the terrorist might blow it up or use it to attack another vessel or a port infrastructure. Terrorist organisations also consider shipping ports and international ocean liners to be appealing targets since they are located at the crossroads of terrorist purpose, capability, and opportunity.¹³

Trafficking and Smuggling

Alongside piracy and terrorism, the sea is also exploited by traffickers and smugglers. Just as the sea is the primary means of transporting legal large cargoes, so the sea is exploited to transport illegal cargoes of people or goods.

Trafficking and smuggling are obvious problems in Southeast Asia. Because of the archipelagic structure of the region, and the fact that maritime borders may be crossed more simply and secretly than land borders, the sea offers an easy opportunity for the criminal. For the people smuggler, Southeast Asia offers a ready supply since the region attracts refugees and asylum seekers. Illicit goods may also be transported by sea and, again, Southeast Asia is a hub. Drugs may be smuggled through Southeast Asia from the ‘Golden Triangle’, which straddles Myanmar, Laos and Vietnam, through Thailand and Cambodia. The production and transportation of methamphetamines and other amphetamine-type stimulants is also a concern in the area, with precursor chemicals most likely travelling by sea.¹⁴ Weapon trafficking is a further serious security issue. Small arms and light weapons proliferation, much of which happens at sea, is a subset of larger transnational criminal networks that encompass terrorism, drug trafficking, money laundering, piracy, and human trafficking. These are all transnational crimes that need regional collaboration to combat.¹⁵

Illegal, Unregulated and Unreported (IUU) Fishing

IUU fishing is a major issue in the region. Clashes between various groups of fishers and accused illegal fishers, as well as maritime law enforcement authorities, occur on a regular basis. In general, these occurrences have minor repercussions, but they can take on a more severe tone when they occur in areas of disputed sovereignty, when confrontations or armed ‘stand-offs’ between law enforcement forces from neighbouring nations are possible. The dangers of fisheries incidents may rise in the future as regional fish stocks continue to drop and fishers are forced to go further away to make worthwhile catches. Tensions are especially likely when fishers encroach upon the waters of foreign nations.¹⁶



Part II - Existing Maritime Security Cooperation in the Region

Malacca Strait Patrol

The Tripartite Technical Experts Group of Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore have worked together to ensure the safety of the Strait of Malacca since the 1970s. These states issued a joint statement on 16 November 1971, recognising and calling attention to the special responsibility of littoral states to assure maritime security.¹⁷

Establishment of the Tripartite Group was a turning point in Strait of Malacca traffic management and environmental protection. The Group is responsible for coordinating cooperation on navigational safety and ship-source pollution in the Strait. The Group also serves as a platform for discussing navigational safety and environmental protection problems in the Strait and meets on a regular basis to coordinate policies. It has contributed to the improvement of navigational safety in the Strait by establishing a vessel routing system and a compulsory ship reporting system known as the Straits of Malacca Ship Reporting System (STRAITREP).¹⁸

However, the continued incidence of piracy in the Strait of Malacca gestures to the continued need for regional security cooperation on Strait security. Thus, the littoral governments have signed bilateral agreements to conduct coordinated patrols in order to combat piracy, to assure information exchange (since 1992), and to maintain direct communication lines with each another.

The Indonesia-Singapore Coordinated Patrols in the Singapore Strait were initiated in 1992 and involved the establishment of direct communication lines between navies as well as organising coordinated patrols in the Singapore Strait every three months. Since 1992, both countries have collaborated to enhance and coordinate their efforts to combat piracy. Similarly, in 1992, Indonesia and Malaysia decided to form a Maritime Operation Planning Team to coordinate patrols in the Malacca Strait. In addition, the defence ministers of Singapore and Malaysia agreed in September 2003 to expand bilateral defence ties and collaboration, particularly in the fight against piracy.¹⁹

Furthermore, since 2004, Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore have taken efforts to improve collaboration and information sharing in the fight against piracy and violent robbery against ships by launching year-round naval patrols in the Strait of Malacca - the so-called Malacca Straits Surface Patrols (MSSP). In September 2005, the three governments, plus Thailand (which was added in 2008), began conducting air patrols in the Strait, named 'Eyes in the Sky' (EiS).²⁰



To increase the effectiveness of these programs, all participating governments signed the Malacca Straits Patrols (MSP) agreement in April 2006, which linked surface and air patrols with intelligence exchange and standardised operating procedures to coordinate the activities of air and surface units.²¹

Thus, we see the MSP is made up of three components: the MSSP, the EiS, and the Intelligence Exchange Group (IEG). In its turn, the IEG has created the MSP Information System to increase coordination and situational awareness among the three countries at sea. These beneficial improvements may have contributed to a decline in maritime violence in the Southeast Asia region. The MSP appears to have been an effective deterrent to pirates and sea robbers.

Sulu-Celebes Sea Trilateral Maritime Patrol

Maritime crimes are not a new phenomenon in the Sulu-Celebes Sea and their surrounding islands. Piracy has existed for a century, and other crimes, including abduction, drug trafficking, human trafficking and arms trafficking, have been widespread since at least the conclusion of World War II.

In the early 2000s, the littoral states surrounding the Sulu-Celebes Sea, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, sought a trilateral cooperative framework to tackle these crimes. However, a trilateral maritime patrol never occurred until 2016, when Abu Sayyaf conducted an unusual number of kidnappings and hostage takings. In 2016, apart from May, attacks against seafarers travelling through the Sulu-Celebes Sea happened every month. After the Abu Sayyaf ransom demand was not paid, some of the captives were murdered.²²

The result of severe attacks against seafarers has forced Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines to strengthen security cooperation in the area affected. Most notably, following 13 months of negotiations, the three nations established Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP) in June 2017. TMP is a framework of maritime security cooperation aiming at safeguarding the Sulu and Celebes Seas against maritime crimes.²³

It was reported that the three nations had built Maritime Command Centres in Sabah, Malaysia, Bongao, the Philippines and Tarakan, Indonesia, to coordinate patrols and oversee the sharing of information and intelligence. This framework was also designed to observe a specified sea lane in which civilian vessels would be permitted to travel and the area which they would not be permitted to navigate.



This is consistent with the June 2016 Joint Statement, in which the three countries agreed to create a ‘transit corridor’ for ships transiting the Sulu-Celebes Sea.²⁴ Furthermore, Indonesia, Malaysia and the Philippines have urged neighboring Southeast Asian nations and non-regional countries to actively join in the effort or give capacity-building support. These nations went a step further in October 2017 by conducting a combined air patrol to monitor the Sulu-Celebes Sea.

The Trilateral Maritime Patrol is modelled on the Malacca Strait Patrol. However, in comparison to the Malacca Strait, the Sulu-Celebes Sea comprises a vast area, and the three nations involved in the Trilateral Maritime Patrol have large exclusive economic zones but limited resources in terms of patrol vessels, manpower and fuel. Thus, maintaining security of the Sulu-Celebes Sea is much more expensive and difficult.²⁵ Also, another major problem is the sensitivity over sovereignty: the Philippines still has a claim over Sabah, and Indonesia and Malaysia have an unresolved maritime border dispute in the Celebes Sea in the Ambalat area.²⁶

The ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC)

The concept of a regional cooperation agreement to combat piracy and armed robbery was originally proposed during the November 1999 ASEAN+1 Summit Meeting in Manila. The idea was presented at a period when there was widespread concern about piracy and armed robbery against ships in Southeast Asia, particularly the Malacca Strait. The Japanese Government recognised that piracy and armed robbery in the region constituted a threat to maritime transportation, potentially resulting in loss of life and undermining the security of sea lines of communication in the region. In 2000, the Japanese Government organised the Asia Anti-Piracy Challenge 2000, a meeting held in Tokyo in 2000 to examine strategies to combat piracy and armed robbery in the Southeast Asia region. As a result, the Tokyo Appeal and the Model Action Plan, two documents, were promulgated at the conference, both of which served as the foundation for the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) Agreement.²⁷

The ReCAAP Agreement was finalised in Tokyo on 11 November 2004 and came into force in November 2006 with 14 Asian contracting parties including North, Southeast, and South Asian countries. To date, ReCAAP has 21 contracting parties including Europe (Norway, the Netherlands, Denmark and the United Kingdom), Australia and the United States. Subsequent to the coming into force of the Agreement, the ISC was launched on 29 November 2006 in Singapore.



The ReCAAP ISC is the region's first multilateral government-to-government anti-piracy and armed robbery operation, having the status of an international organisation with local and international secondees from member nations. It is a framework for promoting communications and information sharing; providing statistical analysis on piracy and armed robbery incidences in Asia; and facilitating capacity-building to enhance member nations' capacity in combatting piracy and armed robbery in the region. The Agreement is underpinned by three pillars: (1) information sharing among member countries, (2) capacity building among member countries through the sharing of best practices in combating piracy and armed robbery, and (3) engaging in cooperative arrangements with like-minded organisations to strengthen member countries' ability to manage incidents at sea.²⁸

The ReCAAP ISC has several strengths: firstly it facilitates information sharing through the ISC Focal Points Network, which contributes to the effectiveness of anti-piracy efforts. Each ReCAAP member appoints a Focal Point (FP) to serve as the ISC's point of contact. Designated ReCAAP FP have significant responsibilities, such as overseeing piracy and armed robbery within their respective country's territorial waters; serving as a point of information exchange with the ReCAAP ISC; enabling their country's law-enforcement investigations; and coordinating monitoring and enforcement activities aimed at combating piracy and armed robbery.²⁹ ReCAAP's capacity-building initiative is another area of strength. Generally, maritime organisations tend to operate alone within a nation, with little interaction across countries. Through capacity-building activities such as exercises, training seminars, and technical assistance programs that exchange best practices, ReCAAP attempts to break down these silos and create a better awareness among contracting parties.³⁰

Furthermore, the ReCAAP ISC engages with variety of organisations which have a role to play in dealing with piracy and armed robbery at sea other than government agencies. ReCAAP forms collaborative agreements with a number of organisations that are interested in exchanging information or undertaking capacity-building programs. The ReCAAP ISC can be viewed as a stepping stone towards regional cooperation since it brings regional governments together to face a common security problem - piracy and armed robbery at sea.³¹

However, ReCAAP also has certain limitations due to its organisation and processes. To begin, several observers have expressed concern that because Malaysia and Indonesia have not signed the Agreement and are not members of ReCAAP, the efficacy of ReCAAP may be restricted. Secondly, the ReCAAP ISC currently does not have an operational function.



This is due to the fact that it obtains information on piracy and armed robbery events from FP, which sometimes results in a delay in reporting. In addition, apart from piracy and armed robbery, shipping and major ports also confront other maritime threats such as maritime terrorism that recently targeted the shipping industry. Many of the precautions adopted by ships to combat piracy and armed robbery also reduce a ship's vulnerability to maritime terrorism.

ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting and ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting-Plus

The ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting (ADMM) was founded in 2006 to offer an organised platform for ASEAN defence establishments. The ADMM is ASEAN's highest level defence consultation and cooperation mechanism that seeks to foster mutual trust and confidence through increasing awareness of defence and security problems. The ADMM aims to promote regional peace and stability via discussion and cooperation in defence and security.³² The ADMM's three Three-Year Work Plans have centred on exchanging views, deepening mutual trust, gaining a better understanding of each other's defence and security policies, building confidence, practical cooperation including with Plus countries, and maintaining communication procedures among ASEAN countries' defence and military organisations.



Figure 5 : HMAS Success joins naval vessels from 12 countries to conduct co-ordinated formation manoeuvres in the South China Sea during the ASEAN Defence Ministers Meeting Plus (ADMM+) sea phase exercises. Photographer: LSIS Christopher Szumlanski.



The ADMM gave regional security a new dimension by transferring it from the diplomatic to the operational sphere. It is the first time since ASEAN's creation that the military establishment was at the forefront rather than playing the supporting part. This was also the first time that the 10 ASEAN military establishments' cooperation was established in a regional framework. Some of its recent accomplishments, like the network of peacekeeping centres, direct communications connection, and logistical support framework, show that the ADMM seeks to find ways for the ASEAN military to develop confidence through more cross-national contacts and collaboration.³³

Later in 2010, the ADMM-Plus was officially launched, it is a venue for ASEAN and its eight Dialogue Partners (Australia, China, India, Japan, New Zealand, Republic of Korea, Russia, and the United States, collectively referred to as the 'Plus Countries') to improve security and defence cooperation for regional peace, stability and development. Currently, the ADMM-Plus focuses on seven areas of practical cooperation: maritime security, counter-terrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping operations, military medicines, humanitarian mine action, and cyber security. To enhance cooperation in these areas, Expert Working Groups have been formed, co-chaired by an ASEAN member and a dialogue partner.³⁴ The ADMM-Plus has been designed to address non-traditional security concerns rather than standard security issues. Non-traditional security problems have provided the greatest difficulties to ASEAN countries and their peoples in recent years. Natural disasters, earthquakes and tsunamis are examples of these concerns, as are transnational crimes, people smuggling, piracy and pandemics.³⁵

The ADMM-Plus establishes an organised framework for ASEAN member nations to diversify and extend their military cooperation scope. Military action and cooperation need information exchange and confidence, which frequently restrict a state's potential allies. The ADMM-Plus also introduces ASEAN member states to the military training and procedures of the Plus nations, a process that raises the standards of the ASEAN militaries. The ADMM-Plus assists ASEAN member nations in establishing links and networks to strengthen their militaries, which is in harmony with the ADMM-Plus objectives. In addition, the co-chairmanship structure of the Expert Working Groups provides for close collaboration between an ASEAN and ASEAN Plus member states.³⁶



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