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## **Increasing Complexity of Stakeholder Roles in Southeast Asian Maritime Security**

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### **SYNOPSIS**

*Different stakeholders contribute in different ways to Southeast Asian maritime security. Arguing that a better understanding of stakeholder roles and interests is required so that a more coordinated and effective maritime security policy can be developed, **SCOTT EDWARDS** and **JOHN BRADFORD** point to some of the ongoing difficulties of aligning different actors towards a common goal.*

### **COMMENTARY**

A 2021 RSIS [project exploring the varied conceptualisations of “maritime security” in Southeast Asia](#) demonstrated the linkages and divergences among regional understandings of what maritime security comprises, and showed how it differs conceptually from security in other domains. This project highlighted the fairly comprehensive nature of Southeast Asian conceptualisation of maritime security, which, in most cases, encompasses “all risks to the prosperity of the state and nation at sea”. The region’s [focus on the state](#) and its institutions, however, belies the importance of the extensive non-state stakeholder activity in the region’s maritime domain. Indeed, it is not only states that are involved in the region’s maritime security; a multitude of actors both within and outside the state engage with the seas and oceans in different ways. Their strengths, weaknesses, perspectives, and interactions need to be better understood for more effective maritime security policymaking, and the differences need to be more closely evaluated to overcome obstacles preventing the alignment of these varied actors towards a common goal.

Coordinating different roles is likely to become increasingly important in the face of geopolitical tension in Southeast Asia's seas. Tensions can result not just from accidents but from simply having navies operating in close proximity to one another in disputed waters. The [region's navies](#) have found themselves having to prepare for these tensions while simultaneously undertaking constabulary roles. To relieve these pressures on the navies and reduce sensitivities regarding international disputes, [coastguards](#) and [law enforcement agencies](#) are becoming increasingly important in tackling many of the region's maritime threats. But these actors also run the risk of politicisation as tensions mount. While non-state stakeholders should not and cannot replace such state actors entirely, greater responsibility is being put on them to act responsibly and contribute to good maritime order.

Despite these trends, policymakers often fail to sufficiently consider non-state stakeholder roles in regional security dynamics. The [research community](#), too, has tended to focus primarily on conventional stakeholders. These include [international organisations](#) that set important norms and standards while providing spaces for cooperation, the states that provide direction and manage various government agencies and parastatal bodies, and the navies and coastguards that monitor and patrol the seas. While there are ongoing questions concerning how these stakeholders can work effectively together, their roles are generally clearer and more established than those of non-state bodies.

When turning to the roles that non-state actors play, the most important consideration is that maritime security can mean different things to these varied stakeholders, and each interacts differently with the maritime security system. The analytical surveys presented at a June 2022 RSIS workshop titled "[Evolving Roles of Maritime Security Stakeholders](#)" showed that stakeholders have particularly strong differences concerning their interests in benefitting from maritime security. Each of the stakeholders was noted to have its own obstacles to overcome, but more challenges emerged when the discussions centred on stakeholders' roles in relation to one another.

The differences are most stark when considering those between state and non-state actors. International law — embodied in conventions such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS) — assigns states the primary responsibility for maritime security provision, as all maritime security threats impinge on state interests in some form. This means states generally take a broad approach to maritime security, focusing on a range of issues by employing various instruments of state power, including coastguards, navies and law enforcement agencies.

For commercial stakeholders, however, maritime security has traditionally been a much narrower concept, giving them a more limited interest in its provision. The [shipping](#), extractive, and [fishery industries](#), for example, focus their concerns only on the threats that have the potential to impact their profitability, usually in the disruption of their respective supply chains. While threats are expanding even for these profit-driven stakeholders — for example, the perils of cyber insecurity are increasingly salient — they remain narrowly focused on a distinct set of threats. Ultimately, even these stakeholders that engage with the oceans on a day-to-day basis may not perceive themselves as maritime security actors. Maritime security is just one type of

interaction that they have with the oceans. Some industry stakeholders may see themselves as being part of the blue economy, focused on the growing pressures for balancing their profit-maximisation goals with maritime environmental protection than on maritime security. Nonetheless, despite their other preoccupations, increasing complexity in the maritime risk environment is driving commercial stakeholders to make greater contributions to the provision of maritime security.



The roles and interests of various stakeholders in the maritime domain, including commercial actors such as shipping industries, need to be better understood to develop more coordinated, effective maritime security policies. *Image from Unsplash.*

The inattention to maritime security does not only apply to non-state actors. Many law enforcement agencies are oblivious of their roles as maritime actors, given that they generally are terrestrially focused. They nevertheless provide important investigative functions that could help thwart several maritime security threats.

Beyond their perceptions of their roles, another complexity is that each of these stakeholders are guided by their own detailed conventions, regulations and norms. These include the above industries that comply with a complex regime of regulations and best practices, but also [non-governmental organisations \(NGOs\)](#) that work from the bottom up and increasingly fulfil some state functions or hold traditional actors accountable, and the state or private [port authorities](#) that manage the gateways to the seas. Such stakeholders often have a stronger sense of what is happening in their domains due to their everyday access and the expertise that this imbues them with, making them important partners in holistic maritime security provision. However, they each generally operate within different normative frameworks.

While different interests, perceptions, and regulatory frameworks give us a fuller understanding of oceans and how they can be protected, these differences raise important questions concerning what a secure maritime domain should look like, or whose vision among the differing visions is to be prioritised. The best outcome would intuitively be a maritime domain free from all threats to all stakeholders while allowing legitimate activities to occur unimpeded. Many of the threats can be dealt with simultaneously, and not all activities are in contention with one another. [Technology providers](#) are contributing through their ability to provide critical data and threat warnings to stakeholders, often at increasingly lower costs. However, technology is not a panacea; the sharing of data derived from technology is often limited because of

different understandings and interests between the various stakeholders to whom technology providers are accountable.

Significant tensions remain because of different understandings and interests. Shipping and port authorities may desire quick and efficient flows of seaborne trade, but the law enforcement's desire to prevent the entry of illicit goods has the potential to slow this down through rigorous search procedures. The petroleum industry may want to operate without disruption, but this cannot always be reconciled with, for example, environmental NGOs' desire to see an ocean free from exploitation. While occupations of oil rigs by environmental activists have only occurred outside of Southeast Asia so far, it is not inconceivable that such protests spread to the region as climate change effects intensify. Differing views can even arise within stakeholder groups, further complicating visions of an ideal maritime domain. For example, smaller fishing industry actors may want the larger actors regulated to reduce overfishing and to level the playing field, but any such regulation would pose a threat to large actors who want to maximise their outputs.

Such conflicting interests have very real implications for coordinating the roles of these actors to best realise their evolving contributions. Even when tensions between state authorities arise from practicalities concerning duplicated efforts and competition for resources — as occurs between some navies and coastguards — coordination and harmonisation have not been easy. When coordination is expanded outwards to non-state stakeholders — some of whom may see each other as sources of insecurity and some at best being reluctant partners — it is clear that states in the region need sufficient plans and structures in place to mediate differences. As the experience regarding ports demonstrates, coordination may be particularly difficult when forging public–private partnerships.

Extrapolating beyond the state to the regional level, coordination becomes even more complex. Navies, law enforcement agencies and coastguards each have their own regional arrangements for providing maritime security. This has led to a complex web of interaction that is continuously expanding around maritime security issues. The potentially negative consequences of bringing different actors into these interactions also need to be considered so they can be mediated. The fishery and shipping industries as well as NGOs all lobby on the international stage through unions or associations. On the one hand, such lobbying brings important perspectives to regional cooperation that were lacking in the past. On the other hand, it has the potential to further complicate regional cooperation if the sheer number of arrangements and fora becomes unwieldy. Unfortunately, these interactions are generally relatively siloed and ineffective in promoting genuine dialogue between stakeholders.

The various regional stakeholders contribute to maritime security provision in important ways. Each stakeholder community has evolved to fill a particular niche or fulfil a distinct role, and the region's seas cannot be wholly secure without each of them providing the tools that they do. At the same time, diverging interests, perceptions, and contributions have implications for regional cooperation on maritime security provision. Achieving a secure maritime domain increasingly requires finding synergies between various stakeholders. Their sometimes-competing visions of the maritime domain suggest the need for some degree of compromise about what secure

regional seas look like in practice. Conventional wisdom suggests that we start with the problems and threats, but this requires a strong understanding of what these are and how they relate to one another.

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The final report of the workshop is also available [online](#).

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