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Evolving Stakeholder Roles in Southeast Asian Maritime Security

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SYNOPSIS

Southeast Asia's maritime stakeholders are taking on new security roles as that navigation a more complex seascape. John Bradford and Scott Edwards explain that is no longer viable to think of the region's maritime stakeholders as 'users' or 'providers.' Instead, emerging threats and mutual expectations have driven the development of a system where stakeholders provide each other with mutual support and can no limit their activities to those that respond to the most immediate risks.

COMMENTARY

Maritime security stakeholders are often thought of as being conceptually divided between providers (states, navies, coast guards, law enforcement, etc.) and benefactors (shippers, seabed extractors, fishers, etc.). As a conceptual approach, such a division worked, albeit imperfectly, during the 20th century post-war liberal order, but this has become less and less true. An increasingly complex risk environment is expanding the roles of economic stakeholders as maritime security providers and driving greater cross-stakeholder cooperation. This development is particularly salient in Southeast Asia, an intensely maritime region that serves as the world's nautical crossroads.



Cargo being transferred at Singapore. Increasingly, maritime security will require all parties as stakeholders. [Photo by Peter Leong on Unsplash.](#)

The post-war liberal order placed the responsibility to maintain maritime security firmly in the hands of states. States deployed their navies, maritime police units, and, if they had them, coast guards to provide security in the waters under their jurisdiction and on the high seas. The states also came together to provide governance, the best example of this being the creation of the International Maritime Organisation in the 1950s ["to provide machinery for cooperation among Governments" in relation to "regulation, safety, efficiency of navigation, and control of pollution."](#) This direction reached a high-water mark in the 1980s when the third United Nations Conference on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS III) concluded with significant compromises between global maritime powers and smaller states.

The post-colonial states of Southeast Asia played essential roles in this system. During the Cold War, they developed national resilience strategies that assigned their navies central roles in the military security, law enforcement, and economic development of maritime space under state control. These forces were at the forefront of the response to maritime security challenges, such as waves of irregular migrants seeking to escape the conflicts in Indochina. The states also actively participated in international organisations and were essential to the debates at UNCLOS III. Singapore's ambassador Tommy Koh served as conference president, while Indonesia's ambassador Hashim Djalal led the successful effort to enshrine legal recognition of archipelagic states, thereby providing international legal underpinnings for his nation's *Wawasan Nusantara* or 'archipelagic vision'.

In the late Cold War, maritime stakeholders sought to better respond to non-traditional threats such as terrorists, pirates, and other criminals. The 1985 hijacking of the ocean liner *Achille Lauro* by terrorists drove states to create the 1988 Convention for the Suppression of the Unlawful Acts against the Safety of Maritime Navigation. Yet, it became increasingly clear that, because of the diverse nature of the maritime threats proliferating across the traditional/non-traditional spectrum, greater cross-stakeholder

cooperation would be necessary. In Southeast Asia, the shipping community, dissatisfied with the states' ability to protect their vessels from armed robbery, funded the establishment of the [International Maritime Bureau Piracy Reporting Centre](#) in Kuala Lumpur.

The terror attacks of 11 September 2001 led to the next watershed in the evolution of stakeholder roles in Southeast Asia. The scale of those attacks triggered a global reach, while contemporaneous ships such as *Our Lady Mediatrix* (Panguil Bay, Philippines, Feb 2000), *Cole* (in port Aden, Oct 2000), *Limburg* (en route Malaysia, Oct 2002), and *SuperFerry 14* (Manila Bay, Feb 2004) demonstrated that the "war on terror" would have to extend to the seas. While debate raged over the value of conflating terrorism with other maritime crimes, Southeast Asian states took actions to counter both, such as the initiation of the trilateral Malacca Strait Patrols and wider joint efforts such as the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), which established its Information Sharing Center in Singapore in 2006. Economic stakeholders such as shippers might have been confident in their ability to protect their profit through a mix of insurance and self-defence measures, including armed guards, but the 2002 adoption of the International Ship and Port Facility Security (ISPS) Code forced them into more proactive measures such as the assignment of Company and Ship Security Officers to implement robust security plans. A recognition that it was inefficient, counterproductive even, for state and private actors to contribute to maritime security without coordination drove efforts to improve cross-stakeholder communication. A regional example is the Information Fusion Centre, established in 2009 and hosted by the Singapore navy, which sponsors shared awareness meetings and produces reports for the public.

In the last decade or so, while there have been substantial efforts to suppress maritime terrorism, piracy, and armed robbery, regional maritime security stakeholders have become concerned with new threats. Increased awareness of economic losses, challenges to national resilience, and extra-regional pressure means concerns have grown with regard to risks involving illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing; irregular migration; labour conditions at sea; and environmental crime. These concerns have been driving states, private actors and community-based actors to improve their coordinated capacity. Parallels can be seen in the way threats of piracy and terrorism pushed governments and the shipping community to do more on their own and together. Imperfections in coordination, capability gaps, and capacity shortfalls are being increasingly filled by NGOs.

Increased involvement of private maritime stakeholders in the project to roll back community-level and economic threats are taking place in an era also characterised by increased state-to-state cooperation at sea. Such competition requires states to deploy maritime forces to demonstrate their sovereign rights, and coast guards are increasingly seen as more suitable for this mission than the navies, as the white hulls are less likely to escalate competition beyond the grey-zone and into open conflict. States, hungry for maritime domain awareness and protecting their economic activities, seek to enlist new actors. The development of maritime militia and the provision of training and equipment to fishermen are the clearest examples of this development, but the increased role of law enforcement agencies in the maritime dimensions of international competition is a less visible example.

The complexity of the current Southeast Asian maritime security environment has broken down the lines that were previously drawn between maritime security providers and benefactors. Stakeholders throughout the maritime domain are becoming more motivated to simultaneously help themselves and enhance cooperation with one another. Yet, it is unclear whether these efforts are keeping pace with threats. Challenges such as terrorism and piracy may seem contained but have not been eliminated. Issues such as IUU fishing and irregular migrations manifest on such a scale that current efforts may not be enough. At the same time, the risk of major interstate conflict is rapidly growing and the adoption of whole-of-nation approaches to prevent and, if necessary, wage wars have serious repercussions throughout the maritime domain.

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