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The Maritime Security Roles of International Organisations in Southeast Asia

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SYNOPSIS

International organisations are a critical pillar of regional maritime security governance. ***ASYURA SALLEH*** *analyses how these organisations are adapting to geostrategic changes, a growing multiplicity of actors, and changes in the threat landscape to continue to uphold universal principles and norms. She points to the importance of checks and balances to hold them accountable, namely, monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that measure the progress of their efforts in the maritime security sphere.*

COMMENTARY

International Organisations' Interests in Maritime Security

International organisations are often founded upon a specific multinational treaty or by a conference of states designed to pursue a specific objective. In these cases, groups of states agree to commit to a framework for organising cooperation in upholding a variety of global and common values that encompass state interests. Consequently, the composition of international organisations can vary in nature, and even more so in objectives. In terms of maritime security, the interests of international organisations are wide-ranging and can include the preservation of marine habitats, implementation of port and shipping regulations, and supporting maritime security sectors in protecting sea lanes of communication.

Ultimately, international organisations strive to uphold universal principles and values reflected in benchmarks such as the United Nations 2030 Agenda Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Common SDGs that have been cited in relation to

ongoing international organisation efforts in maritime security are: SDG 5 to Enforce Gender Equality, SDG 10 to Reduce Inequality; SDG 14 to Develop Life Below Water; SDG 16 to Guarantee Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions; and SDG 17 to Build Partnership for the SDG Goals.

International Organisations' Perceptions of the Most Significant Threats

International organisations are a critical pillar of global governance and contribute to the structure of the international system by actively upholding universal principles and norms. Consequently, the most significant threat to international organisations engaged in maritime security are activities that undermine the sanctity of international law and customary conduct at sea while endangering safe passage along shared waterways.

Such threats can materialise in the form of behaviours such as overexploitation of undersea resources, unregulated discharges at sea, excessive militarisation at sea, maritime crimes such as kidnap-for-ransom and arms trafficking, and, most importantly, the failure to uphold key tenets under international bodies such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) of 1982. The perpetrators behind these threats can include large-scale commercial fishing vessels, state-sponsored militia vessels, syndicate networks, insurgency groups, and even artisanal fishermen who engage in illegal fishing activities.

International Organisations' Contributions to Maritime Security

The goals of international organisations are often shaped by a conference of states that also funds the efforts of these organisations. This structure is reflected in the United Nations, which directs several organisations that aim to contribute to maritime security through various methods.

For example, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO) seeks to defeat global hunger by pursuing intensive research and sustainable efforts in areas that include fisheries, while the International Maritime Organisation (IMO) aims to regulate shipping and prevent marine and atmospheric pollution by imposing the International Ship and Port Facility Security Code. Meanwhile, the Global Maritime Crime Programme (GMCP) under the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) employs capacity-building efforts to equip maritime security sectors such as maritime law enforcement agencies in upholding international law at sea.

These engagements are reflected in Southeast Asia through region-focused initiatives such as the Maritime Law Enforcement Dialogue, which gathers maritime law enforcement agencies to strengthen "white hull" diplomacy among coast guard forces — distinctive from the navies' "grey hull" vessels — and build collaborative solutions to emerging incidents at sea. Other activities include the Marine Environment Protection of the Southeast Asian Seas under IMO, which aims to protect the marine environment from the harmful effects of transit shipping in the region's busy waterways.
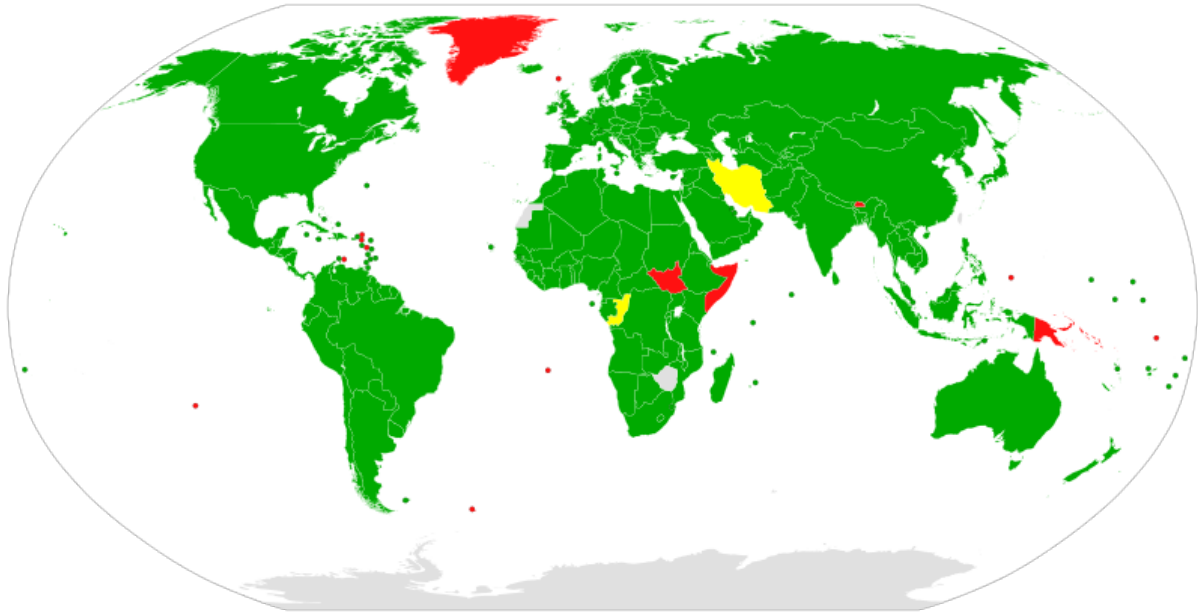
International organisations and their various protocols, such as the widely ratified UN Convention against Transnational Organised Crime (green for ratified, yellow for not yet ratified, red for not yet signed), have an important role to play in managing maritime security. *Image* from Wikimedia.

International Organisations' Operations in the Maritime Security Environment

The conduct of international organisations is often moderated by the checks-and-balances measures regulated by oversight committees. Throughout their maritime security efforts, international organisations are held accountable through monitoring and evaluation mechanisms that measure the progress of their efforts against stated objectives. This allows international organisations to measure the impact of their work while identifying optimal methods to effectively support maritime security sectors in achieving their desired end states.

International organisations also ensure that their efforts are in line with international law that contributes to maritime security such as the Protocol against the Smuggling of Migrants by Land, Sea, and Air, Supplementing the United Nations Convention against Transnational Organised Crime of 2000, European Convention on Human Rights, the International Convention for the Safety of Life, and relevant United Nations Security Council resolutions. By ensuring that all maritime security projects align with the goal of upholding international law, international organisations can strengthen universal principles and behaviour observed at sea.

Evolution of International Organisations' Maritime Security Roles

The nature of the maritime security landscape in regions such as Southeast Asia has drastically shifted in the past 20 years. Where piracy and terrorism had once featured as key threats in the maritime security sector several years ago, other threats have since emerged. These include non-conventional maritime security threats such as drug trafficking along sea routes and poorly regulated military behaviour at sea such as grey zone tactics.

As a result, maritime security sectors in the region have begun to recognise that there is a need to develop other skillsets such as the sustainable development of the blue

economy, closer engagement with grassroots communities, and stronger information-sharing capabilities. Consequently, international organisations have had to rapidly adapt to the changing geostrategic landscape by reshaping the direction of their projects towards supporting capacity-building in more specific areas.

This has led to a call for a more innovative and dynamic approach towards maritime security solutions. These solutions often encourage a heavier emphasis on the role of technology such as maritime domain awareness and on building partnerships with other sectors such as indigenous non-profit organisations that can lend local knowledge and expertise.

Additional Context

The number of maritime security actors in the Southeast Asia region is rapidly multiplying. In addition to the emerging presence of extra-regional actors through the deployment of freedom of navigation operations and extended direct assistance to littoral states, there is a burgeoning of multilateral information fusion centres seeking to keep pace with the fluidity of information and intelligence flows across the region.

Meanwhile, new actors are entering the fold as naval and new coast guard forces undergo a reassessment of agency identities in the midst of emerging maritime security threats. While the emergence of these actors could further strengthen the regional maritime security infrastructure by offering greater access to maritime security resources, there is also a risk of duplication and confusion amid the multiplicity of efforts. International organisations seeking to participate in the complex infrastructure of maritime Southeast Asia would need to be cognisant and respectful of certain cultural and bureaucratic sensitivities while being careful not to duplicate ongoing efforts in the maritime security sphere.

Asyura SALLEH serves at the Global Maritime Crime Programme of the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime, where she oversees regional engagement projects and studies designed to counter maritime crime. This IDSS Paper is #7 of 12 from a workshop the RSIS Maritime Security Programme conducted regarding the evolving roles of Southeast Asia's maritime security stakeholders.

The final report of the workshop is also available online.