



ReCAAP at 20: Why Asia's Counter-Piracy Treaty Still Matters

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By Eric Ang and Chong De Xian

SYNOPSIS

As ReCAAP turns 20, its value lies not merely in tracking piracy numbers but in providing trusted analysis, facilitating regional information-sharing, and strengthening practical capacity. In a more complex maritime environment, the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre has evolved into a stable, neutral and strategically relevant pillar of Asia's maritime security architecture.

COMMENTARY

As Asia's only piracy-focused regional treaty turns 20, it is tempting to judge the efficacy of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP) by a simple question: Are piracy numbers up or down?

But incident totals only tell part of the story.

The maritime environment today looks very different from when ReCAAP was established in 2006. Shipping lanes are more congested. Supply chains are more tightly connected. Tensions at sea have intensified. And maritime risks now intersect with technology vulnerabilities and illicit activity that extends well beyond traditional piracy.

In this complex environment, the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (ISC)'s continued relevance lies not just in incident reporting, but in helping governments and industry make sense of patterns, share trusted information and strengthen cooperation.

From Counting Incidents to Making Sense of Trends

When ReCAAP ISC was first established in Singapore, its mission was straightforward: collect, verify, and disseminate information on piracy and armed robbery against ships in Asia.

Two decades later, that reporting function remains essential. However, the ISC's role has expanded beyond compiling statistics.

With 20 years of data, ReCAAP now tracks not only where incidents occur, but how they evolve – changes in severity levels, geographical shifts and new tactics used by perpetrators. This kind of analysis helps identify emerging hotspots and recurring patterns that may not be obvious from isolated cases.

In a region where many countries already have access to sophisticated maritime tracking systems and surveillance feeds, the challenge is no longer simply seeing what is happening at sea. It is interpreting what those signals mean.

ReCAAP's value lies in providing structured, neutral analysis based on verified reports. For law enforcement agencies, maritime authorities and shipping companies, this enables a shared baseline for assessing risk and developments. Instead of reacting to individual headlines, stakeholders can look at broader trends and adjust their preparedness accordingly.

Industry feedback over the years suggests that shipping companies use ReCAAP's reports as part of their risk assessment processes. In that sense, the Centre's work feeds into real-world decisions, not just annual reviews.

A Trusted Regional Information-sharing Network

Beyond analysis, one of ReCAAP ISC's most significant achievements has been building a trusted information-sharing network used across governments and industry stakeholders.

Each contracting party designates a national focal point to receive and share incident information. These focal points disseminate reports to relevant agencies within their jurisdictions, while the ISC makes advisories available to the shipping industry, insurers and maritime associations.

Over time, this system has matured into a functioning mechanism for the timely exchange of information across governments and industry.

That credibility has been reinforced through consistent engagement with maritime agencies and industry platforms, including regional coast guard forums and outreach sessions with industry entities. Digital tools such as the ReCAAP mobile app and its ReVAMP dashboard have also lowered barriers to reporting and improved access to information.

ReCAAP's designation as a Centre of Excellence in 2018 and the use of its data by international bodies such as the International Maritime Organization (IMO) further underscore its standing.

This matters particularly at a time when maritime governance in Asia is becoming more complex. Bilateral, multilateral and regional initiatives now operate alongside one another. In such an environment, information-sharing can easily become fragmented or politicised.

Against this backdrop, ReCAAP remains one of the few regionally owned, treaty-based mechanisms focused specifically on piracy and armed robbery against ships. Its continuity provides a stable and neutral platform that different actors can rely on, even amid wider geopolitical uncertainty.

Strengthening Practical Capacity

The third pillar of ReCAAP's work is capacity building.

This goes beyond workshops or general statements of cooperation. It involves practical know-how: how to structure reporting systems, how to classify incidents consistently, and how to present analysis in ways that agencies can use.

Common definitions, reporting templates, and analytical frameworks help reduce divergence in interpretation and improve comparability across jurisdictions. That consistently strengthens the overall reliability of the regional incident picture.

ReCAAP has also supported capacity-building efforts beyond Asia, including efforts linked to the Djibouti Code of Conduct (DCOC) and the Jeddah Amendments. These exchanges focus on how cooperation arrangements are set up and run in practice. Engagements with centres in places such as Mombasa and Seychelles fit within this same role, illustrating the transfer of process knowledge and operational experience rather than relying on one-off outreach.

For the shipping industry, guidance materials, advisories and analytical reports help operators and crew better understand risk areas and reporting channels. While ReCAAP does not direct operations at sea, it has contributed significantly to improving the quality and use of information contributing to safer navigation.

Looking Ahead

Maritime threats are becoming more complex, and geopolitical tensions, technological vulnerabilities and evolving criminal tactics will continue to test regional resilience.

Against this backdrop, institutions that sustain trusted information flows and shared professional standards become more important, not less.

After 20 years, the relevance of ReCAAP is not best judged by incident totals alone. The more important story is how the ISC has evolved, from a reporting mechanism

into a centre for structured analysis, trusted information-sharing and practical capacity building.

As it continues to build on these three pillars, ReCAAP will remain a stabilising and strategically relevant component of Asia's maritime security architecture, helping regional actors understand what they are seeing at sea and responding with greater coherence.

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