

Managing the Rise of Southeast Asia's Coast Guards



February 2019

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INTRODUCTION

Over the past few years, Southeast Asian states have begun either significantly increasing their investments in coast guards and other maritime law enforcement agencies (MLEAs) or have considered standing up new agencies.¹ As this has occurred, there has been a rising conversation about the significance not only for these countries themselves, but for wider regional stability and for external partners such as the United States.

While recognizing the growing attention that Southeast Asian states are paying to coast guards and MLEAs more generally is a useful starting point, this is only a first step. In order to fully contend with the implications of Southeast Asia's coast guards and to integrate them into wider regional maritime security, policymakers in the Asia-Pacific must be mindful of both the opportunities and challenges inherent in this trend as well as follow through on a series of initiatives at the national, bilateral, regional, and global levels in the coming years.

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UNDERSTANDING THE RISE OF SOUTHEAST ASIA'S COAST GUARDS

The idea of maritime law enforcement entities in general and coast guard-like bodies in particular is not entirely new in Southeast Asia. Given that the region is home to important waterways such as the South China Sea and the Malacca Straits, Southeast Asian states have long been attuned to the opportunities and challenges in the maritime domain, and correspondingly have recognized the need for entities to manage non-military challenges in the maritime domain, even if they are not necessarily labeled a single, centralized, 'coast guard.' Indeed, one can trace these institutions back even to pre-independence days in some cases. For instance, Singapore, historically a port city, traces its current Police Coast Guard (PCG) back to the Marine Branch formed back in 1866, while the idea of a coast guard in the Philippines technically dates back over a century beginning with the Bureau of Coast Guard and Transportation, though this has shifted over time subsequently.²

A few key drivers and trends over the past few years have gradually led to more countries in Southeast Asia either to either significantly boost their existing coast guard capabilities or considering standing up new maritime law enforcement entities. The first is the sheer increase in maritime-related activity in the region. The rise of East Asian economies, the increase in global trade, and the resulting boost in shipping demand, has led to a surge in maritime commerce in the region. By one count, traffic in the narrow, strategically significant Malacca Straits alone, which already accounts for over a third of traffic, has doubled in the past decade, and is set to increase a further 50 percent out to the next decade.³ That has

in turn increased the pressure on countries – particularly littoral states such as Malaysia, Indonesia, and Singapore – to invest more in authorities who can manage this activity and its potential consequences, be it ensuring the navigational or safeguarding against maritime pollution.

A second and related driver is the proliferation of maritime security challenges. As more state and non-state actors develop the willingness and capability to utilize the maritime realm, this only increases the potential challenges that could arise from its usage – be it illegal fishing, piracy, terrorism, or trafficking – and that wide spectrum of maritime-related challenges has in turn exposed the gaps in capabilities to deal with maritime law enforcement issues.⁴ In Southeast Asia, the period following the September 11 attacks in particular increased the attention of regional states to threats such as maritime terrorism and piracy, which in turn catalyzed a focus on strengthening maritime law enforcement. For instance, the development of Malaysia's coast guard-equivalent body, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA), which is today formally identified as the Malaysia Coast Guard on an international basis, dates its existence back to 2005 following rising concerns about maritime terrorism and piracy in a post-9/11 context, which also saw the birth of new regional organizations including the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP).⁵

A third driver is the ongoing disputes and rivalries between states. Southeast Asian states still have a number of lingering disputes that remain between them, and particular periods have led to increases in attention to shoring up national positions on the water, at times generating ripple

effects as well in terms of how maritime assets are developed and utilized. In recent years, concerns about the South China Sea have also played into this mix, with China's use of maritime law enforcement vessels in related activities leading Southeast Asian states such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam to consider developing their own capabilities to respond to this as well. The effect has been the increasing use of coast-guard type forces or so-called 'white hulls' in efforts to protect or safeguard country claims.⁶

A fourth driver is interactions with foreign partners. As Southeast Asian states have interacted more with maritime partners

with more capable coast guards or MLEAs, they have become increasingly more sophisticated in the investments that they make, looking beyond just naval capabilities and developing a fuller spectrum of maritime capabilities that provide them more options to engage both domestically and internationally. While the mix of partners tends to vary by country, Japan has been particularly influential in its effects on the development of the maritime capabilities of Southeast Asian States. The effects include not just increases in equipment or training, but also changes in structure of MLEAs and the nature of thinking about coordination between various bodies.⁷

Table 1: State of Coast Guards/Equivalent Functions in Southeast Asian States

Country	Coast Guard/Equivalent	Date Founded	Host Organization
Brunei	Marine Police	1921 (RBPF Founding)	Royal Brunei Police Force
Cambodia	N/A, managed by Royal Cambodian Navy (RCN)	N/A	N/A
Indonesia	BAKAMLA	2015	Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal, and Security Affairs
Malaysia	Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA)	2005	Ministry of Home Affairs
Laos	N/A, no navy	N/A	N/A
Myanmar	N/A, managed by Myanmar Navy	N/A	N/A
Philippines	Philippine Coast Guard (PCG)	1967	Department of Transportation
Singapore	Police Coast Guard	1993	Singapore Police Force
Thailand	N/A, Coast Guard Squadron operates under Royal Thai Navy (RTN)	N/A, 1992	N/A, Royal Thai Navy
Timor-Leste	N/A, managed by naval component of Falintil-FDTL (F-FDTL)	N/A	N/A
Vietnam	Vietnam Coast Guard (VCG)	2013 (previously Vietnam Marine Police, 1993)	Ministry of National Defense

Source: Author's analysis based on open-source information

These drivers have all contributed to a greater attention by several key Southeast Asian states to the development of coast guard-like bodies and other MLEAs. The most visible demonstrations of these are among the more capable Southeast Asian states that already have identifiable coast guards. Among these, Malaysia and the Philippines have added to their existing capabilities, while Vietnam and Indonesia set up new, dedicated coast guard entities in 2013 and 2015 respectively after years of deliberation and shifts in their policies.⁸

But beyond this, there are also other Southeast Asian countries which do not have separate, designated coast guards that have nonetheless been either eyeing setting up such an agency or changing aspects of their maritime security governance more generally. In mainland Southeast Asia, for instance, Cambodia and Myanmar have previously expressed interest to varying degrees in setting up designated coast guards with some degree of separation from their navies. Meanwhile, Thailand, which has a designated Coast Guard Squadron within the Royal Thai Navy, has also been considering ways to reconfigure and better centralize maritime security in recent years, including upgrading the role of the Thailand Maritime Enforcement Coordinating Center (Thai-MECC) as a coordinating agency.⁹

Table 1 summarizes the current state of coast guard and maritime law enforcement bodies in Southeast Asia, noting the agencies involved, their evolution, and where they are hosted. As the table makes clear, while most of these states have been paying greater attention to coast guard-like agencies and maritime law enforcement entities more generally and are often described as being part of nationwide trends, there are notable differences as

well. Countries with coast guards or coast guard-like entities are at varying stages of progress and tend to organize and host that function differently – whether it be in their police forces or government departments and ministries – while those that do not have coast guards also still display variances, whether it be Thailand which does have a designated Coast Guard Squadron all the way to the exception in landlocked Laos which still does not possess a navy.

Beyond the current state of coast guards and MLEAs in Southeast Asia more generally, there has also been a noticeable uptick in both the investments made by these countries as well as the size of the vessels that they are investing in during recent years. In terms of investments, a notable case is the Philippines, as evidenced by the 2018 defense budget where 6.7 billion pesos were allocated to the PCG under the Duterte administration.¹⁰ Malaysia has also been stepping up its coast guard investments as well despite overall defense cuts that have been witnessed under the new government which took power in May, as well as some shifts in the role of the MMEA more generally.¹¹

In terms of acquisitions, Vietnam has been the standout case by far, with the combination of local shipbuilders and assistance from a mix of countries such as the United States, Japan, and European countries, resulting in the building of larger ships, including four 4,300 ton multirole patrol vessels of the DN-4000 class projected to come online starting in 2019 which would be the largest vessels operated by coast guards in Southeast Asia. Indonesia too has been increasing the capacity of its vessels, with BAKAMLA launching what was then its largest ship

Table 2: Examples of Larger Coast Guard Vessels in Southeast Asia

Country	Name/Class/Type	Source	Specifications	Commissioning Year
Indonesia	KN <i>Tanjung Datu</i> (OPV)	Indonesia (PT Palindo)	2,400 tons (110 meters)	2017
Malaysia	OPV	Malaysia (TH Heavy Engineering and Destini Shipbuilding – Damen design)	1,890 tons (83 meters)	2021
Philippines	OPV270	France (OCEA Shipyard)	1,400 tons (82 meters)	2019
Vietnam	DN-4000	Vietnam (Damen)	4,300 tons	Unspecified

Source: Author's analysis based on open-source information

designated the KN Tanjung Datu with pennant number 1101 of over 2,400 tons back in November 2017.¹² Malaysia and the Philippines have also been moving to acquire vessels beyond the 1,000 ton range as well that are set to come online in the coming years. Table 2 shows a few examples of some of the larger vessels either currently in or set to come online among the key countries.

All in all, it is clear that a series of drivers have been pushing Southeast Asian states to think more about and invest more in their maritime law enforcement agencies, including coast guard-like entities. This only underscores the fact that the rise of coast guards and MLEAs in the region is a trend that is unlikely to ebb anytime soon, and that it is important to grasp both the opportunities and challenges that they present.

OPPORTUNITIES AND CHALLENGES

The rise of coast guards and MLEAs more generally in Southeast Asia presents a mix

of opportunities and challenges for the countries themselves, other states in the region, and external actors. Being cognizant of this mix is important in order to seize the opportunities and manage the challenges in the coming years amid wider domestic, regional and global developments and trends.

First, coast guards add to the range of capabilities that countries need to respond to a wide range of internal maritime security challenges. Developing coast guard capabilities provides a way for countries to tackle the long list of maritime security-related issues with the limited resources they have, especially ones that do not necessarily require large, expensive, and heavily armed vessels and naval assets that may introduce a military component.¹³ This explains why Southeast Asian states with existing coast guards tends to define their responsibilities broadly, giving them a role not only in managing maritime disputes often the focus of headlines, but also countering environmental pollution, combating illegal activities such as

smuggling, piracy, and trafficking, and participating in search and rescue and humanitarian assistance and disaster relief.¹⁴

Second, coast guard capabilities can also potentially provide greater flexibility in the way countries can respond to what are characterized as grey-zone challenges.¹⁵ Even though most of the coast guard vessels currently held by Southeast Asian states are smaller and more modestly armed relative to more capable actors such as China or Japan, the development of such capabilities has nonetheless feed into the idea of them being useful in so-called grey-zone contingencies that warrant the deployment of traditionally less escalatory non-military assets. A case in point is territorial and maritime disputes in the South China Sea, where we have witnessed Southeast Asian claimant states – particularly Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines – integrating coast guard capabilities more in consolidating their positions and safeguarding claims.¹⁶

Third, developing coast guard capabilities offers opportunities for building linkages with partner countries. Particularly amid the growing importance of maritime security as a field of cooperation in the defense realm, coast guard capabilities offer another opening for Southeast Asian countries to develop collaboration in this field with key allies and partners beyond just the naval realm and vice versa as well, whether it be for activities such as capacity-building, training, exercises, or the transfers or sales of equipment. Indeed, as Southeast Asian states have built their coast guard capabilities, we have seen a number of such engagements already take place among countries in the subregion as well as outside actors in strategic spaces, whether it be in older arrangements tied to counterpiracy operations Malacca Straits

or newer ones such as those related to tackling transnational challenges in the Sulu Sea.¹⁷

But the increased focus on developing coast guard capabilities also presents some challenges. One of these is capacity constraints. At times, countries with already stretched budgets may find it difficult to finance the additional equipment and manpower required for the maintenance and ongoing growth of a separate coast guard. The PCG is a case in point, with cash-strapped Manila long looking to build up a force capable of helping it cover 7,000 islands which constitute about a tenth of the world's entire coastline. While there have been increasing investments in Philippine capabilities in recent years, there are also lingering challenges with aspects such as technology and manpower that nonetheless continue to compound difficulties for Manila in this regard.¹⁸

The second challenge is related to coordinating maritime security. While this is a problem that is seen across the board in Southeast Asia to varying degrees, Indonesia, the world's largest archipelagic state, is a particularly notable example. With at least a dozen different national agencies responsible for maritime security affairs in the country, it is far from surprising that, even with the creation of BAKAMLA, Indonesian officials acknowledge that coordination continues to be a challenge.¹⁹ Meanwhile, in neighboring Malaysia, even though MMEA was created with the intention to make it the lead maritime law enforcement agency, there have since been efforts by other agencies to try to carve out a role for themselves as well, thereby illustrating how the creation of new agencies can generate competitive impulses that prevent the resolution of overlapping jurisdictions.²⁰

The third and final challenge is the heightened risk of conflict. While the use of coast guards rather than navies could be seen as a means of reducing the chance of direct military conflict, at the same time, there is also evidence that coast guards have been involved in a number of incidents at the lower threshold of escalation.²¹ While the focus thus far has been largely on China's use of MLEAs, the worry is that if Southeast Asian states increasingly use their coast guards not only for routine maritime law enforcement tasks but also for defending and consolidating their positions with respect to disputes such as those in the South China Sea, that also potentially heightens the risk of such conflict from arising in the future as well.

While managing these opportunities and challenges will not be easy for policymakers in the countries in question as well as other interested parties, that is exactly what will be required in order for them to contend with the constraints, tradeoffs, and dilemmas that these trends and developments present. Doing so will require attention to broader dynamics that will affect the domestic, regional, and global levels.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

Policymakers from Southeast Asian states as well as other interested parties and relevant actors will have to manage the aforementioned mix of opportunities and challenges that arise out of the increasing emphasis in the region on the development of MLEAs in general and coast guards in particular. In doing so, policymakers should keep in mind six lines of effort across the domestic, regional, and global levels.

First, the development of coast guard capabilities strengthens the necessity for

a clarification of their role domestically in each of these countries. In several of the countries where new coast guard like bodies have been established, whether it be the Vietnam Coast Guard or BAKAMLA, despite the passage of laws and other directives, observers and practitioners alike are well aware of the fact that there is still either a lack of clarity over what responsibilities various maritime institutions have during wartime and peacetime or a gap between how burden-sharing ought to work and how it actually operates in practice.²²

Some of this can be addressed by minimizing potential overlaps in legal frameworks and establishing clear lines of authority and command and control. But this must also be accompanied by practical measures that can manage rivalries between competing institutions to ensure that what is written on paper translates to what goes on in the water as well. Though this will no doubt be a continuing challenge in many cases, the development and operationalization of frameworks, norms, and practices are the fundamental building blocks for proper maritime security governance.

Second, the addition of coast guard capabilities also reinforces the importance of integrating other non-governmental actors into policymaking as part of a wider 'civilianization' of some functions previously thought of as being military-focused. Given the reality that effectively addressing the list of challenges that Southeast Asia's maritime law enforcement agencies contend with – be it piracy or illegal fishing or terrorism – will require a multi-stakeholder effort, governments need to facilitate the transition from a 'whole of government' approach to a 'whole of society' approach to confront some of these issues.

To be sure, some Southeast Asian states have been making progress in certain areas, such as case the greater attention given to the education of fishermen by MLEAs in Vietnam to help address issues such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing.²³ But in many cases, countries are still well short of the kind of comprehensive, two-way engagement that views non-governmental actors, be it the private sector or civil society groups, as being sources of input or ideas rather than just actors that need to be educated. Programs like the MMEA's Sahabat Maritim, designed to foster better relationships between the coast guard and various stakeholders such as shipbuilding associations and private companies, have been good starting points but still continue to fall short of what is required in this regard.²⁴

Third, the birth of coast guards in the region reinforces the need for more regional cooperative activities in order to integrate them into core areas of collaboration. Apart from the utility that can be gained by their addition, integrating these newer actors into activities that regional states are already involved in as well as diplomatic bodies which work on the specific challenges that MLEAs are helping address is important to increase transparency, familiarity, and interoperability.

Some of this can be done by continuing to integrate coast guards into existing operational activities between countries, including those designed to counter piracy, armed robbery, illegal fishing, and other transnational crimes in institutions such as ReCAAP. But this should also be supplemented by relatively newer efforts to link efforts to existing regional centers that can serve as hubs for collaboration, including the Information Fusion Center

in Singapore, the Thai-MECC (set to transition to the Maritime Enforcement Administration Center) and the new focal points established between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (Indomalphi) as part of wider trilateral collaboration in the Sulu-Sulawesi Sea including port visits and maritime training activities.²⁵

Fourth, greater attention should also be paid to the development of rules and norms in regional institutions that can help regulate and manage both the opportunities and challenges that come with the rising focus on maritime law enforcement capabilities in recent years. Despite the occasional call for entirely new organizations amid such trends, there are in fact already a range of institutions that are capable of dealing with this, either within the ASEAN framework – such as the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus (ADMM-Plus), the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), and the newly-established ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) – or outside of it such as the Heads of Asian Coast Guard Agencies Meeting (HACGAM).²⁶

Yet more can be done to strengthen these efforts. Some aspects of this are more routine, such as continuing to integrate coast guards and other maritime law enforcement organizations into the ongoing agendas, workplans, blueprints, and committees of institutions including the ARF and the ADMM-Plus. But this should also be supplemented by other initiatives as well, such as more minilateral efforts by like-minded states to promote certain norms and practices through words and actions including on the sidelines of meetings that can help catalyze actionable moves. In addition, efforts need to be made to harmonize efforts within these institutions across the board, whether it be

on streamlining reporting procedures for incidents, facilitating quicker information sharing, or condensing the long list of maritime security-related meetings in the wake of real constraints faced by officials in smaller Southeast Asian countries in attending them. Countries such as Vietnam have been quite active in promoting efforts in this vein, and the lead up to Hanoi's upcoming chairmanship of ASEAN in 2020 offers a window of opportunity.²⁷

Fifth, the greater emphasis on the development of coast guards and other MLEAs reinforces the need for greater capacity-building by allies and partner countries. In particular, here is a greater need for the development of not just equipment, which often is the focus of most of the headlines, but also expertise, manpower, technology, structure, and culture that serve as the building blocks for capable MLEAs and maritime security governance more generally.

There are a variety of mechanisms through which this can be accomplished, whether it be through workshops, training, and exercises, and there have already been several examples in this respect both within the region and by external partners, with the Expanded ASEAN Seafarers' Training (EAST) program and the U.S. Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) being two cases in point. Yet as policymakers ponder potential new initiatives, efforts also need to be directed into coordinating activities among various actors to ensure that funding is being streamlined and utilized effectively. The United States and some of its like-minded partners, such as Japan and Australia, can play an especially valuable role in this respect, whether it be with Southeast Asian states by themselves or as part of a wider approach directed at Indo-Pacific states.²⁸

Sixth and finally, the rising focus on maritime law enforcement agencies also strengthens the necessity for better regulations for behavior and efforts to manage risks in this realm. There are a range of arrangements across the board – be it hotlines, guidelines, standard operating procedures, and best practices – which, for all their limitations, can at the very least help provide better transparency and communication among coast guards and other vessels as well and better manage escalation dynamics should parties choose to utilize them.

Some of this will involve building on existing arrangements, be it bilateral efforts between Southeast Asian states in setting up hotlines or other interactions to enhance coast guard cooperation, or international arrangements that can offer guidance as to the role of MLEAs, such as the International Regulations for Preventing Collisions at Sea (COLREGS) or the International Convention for the Safety of Life at Sea (SOLAS). Other aspects will require new mechanisms, agreements and understandings, whether it be the ongoing attempts to expand the Code for Unplanned Encounters at Sea (CUES) to cover coast guard and civilian vessels or the continuing conversation about a binding code of conduct on the South China Sea that would ideally address the role of such agencies as well.²⁹

CONCLUSION

A series of drivers over the past few years have clearly led Southeast Asian states to significantly increase their investments in coast guards and other MLEAs or standing up new agencies entirely, and this trend is expected to continue into the future as well. While this trend is not entirely new and is to be expected, it also presents opportunities and challenges to regional maritime security that these countries need to manage by

themselves and in collaboration with other willing partners and entities as well both at home and abroad. Doing so will not be easy – it will require clarifying the roles of these agencies domestically, integrating them more into bilateral and regional activities, adding to and adjusting the normative and rules-based framework.

This is not to suggest that this is an impossible task to accomplish. There are already a number of existing efforts and best practices both within Southeast Asia and beyond the region that offer suggestions for the way forward, and these can be supplemented with additional useful ones as well. There are also countries, institutions and individuals whose expertise can be brought to bear to help contend with this within the wider regional maritime security space if states remain open to that assistance. The key, as ever, is to combine these various lines of effort into an integrated, comprehensive path forward that makes sense not just for individual countries, but for wider regional and global stability as well.

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