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## ***The Role of Navies in Maritime Security in Southeast Asia***

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*The Brandenburg-class frigate, FGS Bayern. The appearance of U.S. Department of Defense (DoD) visual information does not imply or constitute DoD endorsement.*

### **SYNOPSIS**

*Maritime security in Southeast Asia encompasses a wide range of roles, depending on national contexts that are nevertheless not uniform in the region. **BAGUS JATMIKO** argues that for some Southeast Asian navies, flexibility is necessary, given that these organisations have to prepare for traditional war-fighting missions while at the same time undertaking other roles such as protection of fisheries, counter-terrorism and humanitarian and disaster relief.*

### **COMMENTARY**

Navies' main interest is to preserve maritime security since it directly impacts efforts to preserve and safeguard national sovereignty and populations. There is some variation from one nation to another regarding the responsibilities and authorities assigned to their navies. However, navies' roles generally encompass a wide spectrum, from wartime roles, with the dominance of military threats directly targeting national sovereignty, to peacetime roles, which can be categorised as maritime diplomacy or constabulary. Constabulary roles are those that most immediately engage with maritime security. These three roles converge on the main goal to preserve and safeguard national maritime sovereignty and security, which [Ken Booth famously depicted as a trinity](#).

Southeast Asian nations, like many around the world, increasingly rely on the maritime domain for economic prosperity. This demand for more security therefore suggests [the need for interconnection between organisations](#) within and outside the governmental structure, including navies. For most countries in the region, [navies are](#)

[the "Primus Inter Pares"](#) or the first among equals in maritime security. Their roles in maritime security were established early in the domain's development and are consequently significant in some cases. Nevertheless, this perspective is not equally shared among Southeast Asian countries. There is divergence in the perceived level of importance concerning navies' involvement in maritime security.

### **Navies' Perception of the Most Significant Maritime Security Threats**

In today's strategic environment, navies perceive a spectrum of threats as significant, encompassing the nature of military to non-military threats. For most navies, threats should be equally addressed per their occurrence or latency despite their characteristics (e.g., more inclined to law enforcement than military threats). The rationale is that navies should not focus on one type of threat while abandoning the others.

Nevertheless, threat assessment is generally contextual. What is considered a significant threat at one time might not be considered as such in a different situation. On one end of the threat spectrum, non-military threats lean towards characteristics of transnational crimes in the maritime domain, where the culprits are non-state actors. Transnational crime encompasses many illicit activities, ranging from Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing to trafficking, smuggling, and acts of terrorism. Transnational crime has become a significant threat to countries, particularly as a more interconnected world escalates its complexity.



The protection of fishing industries in Southeast Asia remains a key priority for the navies of the region. *Photo by Rio Lecatompessy on Unsplash.*

On the other end of the spectrum, state-based threats have re-emerged as more recognisable. These lean towards military threats targeting national sovereignty. This

notion takes precedence in the Russia-Ukraine war and, to bring it closer to home, the South China Sea dispute. These instances clearly exemplify a conflict where one state threatens another state's territorial sovereignty with its military prowess.

### **Governance over Navies' Maritime Security Activities**

Navies generally receive their mandate from their respective national constitution and regulations. These provide governance for navies to conduct their tasks, including serving as the primary state security apparatus to secure the maritime domain. Several national regulations may also be derived from the ratification of international conventions regulating international practices related to maritime security, such as the UNCLOS 1982, the Suppression of Unlawful Act against the Safety of Maritime Navigation (SUA) convention, and wider body of international humanitarian law.

### **Naval Operations in the Maritime Security Environment**

Navies have both the responsibility and capability to carry out maritime security roles.

First, they are responsible for the nation's defence and security as the national constitution mandates. Navies have the physical capability (hardware) and resources to ensure the implementation of their mandates, encompassing combat, humanitarian assistance/disaster relief (HADR), and search and rescue capabilities. For that reason, navies possess warships, field personnel, and provide technical support to attain these objectives.

Second, navies have software sets that provide the legality and code of conduct for naval activities during wartime and peacetime to achieve their mandates. Navies use these aspects to legally protect their physical assets and resources, and conduct their operational missions.

### **Navies and Maritime Awareness**

Navies have the capabilities and systems to develop their maritime surveillance system internally and improve Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) along with other maritime stakeholders. In collaboration with assets from other stakeholders, navies' assets are significant in improving national MDA capabilities. Navies' complex information processing system structure includes physical assets such as satellites, sensors, ships, aircraft, and data processing and command and control centres. This system aims to provide updated, valuable information for every naval mission conducted. Examples of this system are the Singaporean and Indonesian Information Fusion Centres (IFCs).

### **How Navies Contribute to Maritime Security**

From the preceding discussion, we can infer navies' general contribution to maritime security within the boundaries of their respective country's national mandate. The figure provides the myriad of functions navies can perform for maritime security and beyond. Generally, navies perform these operations through concrete and direct contributions to the provision of security and protection of vulnerable stakeholders.

Additionally, navies collaborate with other stakeholders to provide capacity-building and confidence-building measures at several levels, including national, bilateral, regional, and multilateral cooperation. This notion is based on the presupposition that national or international maritime security cannot be achieved by only one stakeholder considering the vast maritime territory. This is especially the case in Southeast Asia, where expansive maritime domains would be overwhelming for any stakeholder to handle.

## **Evolution of the Role of Navies in Maritime Security**

Traditional navies were established primarily as a state apparatus for the purpose of warfighting and protecting national sovereignty. However, the role of navies has evolved because the global strategic and maritime environment has changed dynamically.

Looking at today's strategic paradigm, there are two emerging options for navies.

First, they shed and terminate their traditional roles in warfighting while changing their roles dramatically to accommodate current demands. The second option is for navies to [develop incremental capability changes](#) in addition to their warfighting abilities and remain flexible military organisations.

The former is improbable since the possibility of conflict between states is clearly reiterated in the case of the Russia-Ukraine war and the South China Sea conflict. The latter option is more plausible where navies incrementally develop their capabilities to conduct operations in various circumstances, along the spectrum of peacetime and wartime, including the increasingly salient grey area.

In Southeast Asia, the first option is unlikely to be adopted by navies. Some navies, such as the Malaysian and Singaporean navies, focus on their warfighting capabilities. Meanwhile, the Indonesian navy is developing capabilities in addition to their warfighting abilities to remain flexible with the current demands placed upon them.

## **Additional Context**

The comprehensive nature of the role of navies in maritime security is highly contextual. It varies from one country to another. Hence, it is crucial to understand the context behind the involvement of navies in the maritime domain – particularly in national boundaries, including historical dynamics and institutional maturity. From a historical perspective, for example, the Indonesian navy's role in maritime security was rooted from the early time of the nation's independence and has been embedded ever since.

Thus, Southeast Asian navies often feel reluctant to relinquish parts of their maritime security role. Moreover, their dominant roles sometimes result from the lack of capabilities of other government maritime stakeholders, which eventually leads to the involvement of navies in this domain.

The maturity context is where states gain more understanding of the benefits of role diversification in maritime security, affecting contributions. The formation of MMEA

(Malaysia Maritime Enforcement Agency) and BAKAMALA (Badan Keamanan Laut or Maritime Security Agency, Indonesia's nascent de facto coast guard) are examples of the maturation of countries in perceiving the significance of diversification in maritime security beyond the unique role of navies.

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

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