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No. 082/2022 dated 21 December 2022

The Roles of Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) in Southeast Asian Maritime Security

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SYNOPSIS

*NGOs in the maritime security field have varied interests, ranging from research-based think tanks, single-issue advocacy organisations, to community-based civil society groups. **JAY BENSON** argues that NGOs can exercise subtle, indirect but still extremely important roles to play in shaping tangible progress towards security and good governance in the maritime domain.*

COMMENTARY

The interests of NGOs in the maritime security field vary widely based on their particular focus. The field is truly expansive. It may incorporate research-based think tanks, advocacy organisations oriented around a single issue, and community-based civil society organisations.

As a result, NGOs have extremely divergent geographic foci, issue area interests, and orientations regarding how they approach policy impact. Some organisations may be focused, for example, on fisheries management in a single community, and advocacy with local policymakers around the interests of that particular industry. The All Indonesian Fishermen Association (HNSI), for example, has local branches across the archipelago, advocating for policies and articulating the key role of local fishing industries.

Others may cover the breadth of maritime security and governance topics, producing primarily research and analysis catered to broader regions, or the entire globe, and targeting their work and engagement towards regional and/or international bodies. The work of organisations such as Global Fishing Watch, which compiles vessel and

fisheries data from across the globe, and Stable Seas, which provides a variety of research and policy-oriented products covering the breadth of maritime security and governance issues, are examples of this much larger geographic and thematic scope.



Fish being sold in a Vietnamese market. Maritime NGOs, such as those focused on fisheries protection, have an important role to play in preserving the maritime environment and national fisheries. [Image by Duangporn Wiriya on Unsplash.](#)

But, while many actors view maritime security from the perspective of their own institutions and governments, NGOs, commonly, have a shared goal of advancing the interests of people and communities. Be it fishers, maritime migrants, or broader coastal communities, people, not necessarily institutions or governments, are often fundamental to how maritime-oriented NGOs think about maritime security and governance issues.

NGOs' Perceptions of the Most Significant Maritime Security Threats

Because NGOs are community-oriented in their outlook, they are often more focused on non-traditional security and maritime governance issues.

While states, regional organisations, and maritime enforcement agencies may perceive risk from the realm of geopolitics, NGOs often perceive risk at a somewhat more organic level. The focus may be less on the intrusion of another state's naval assets, lack of political will around the adoption of an international maritime pact or treaty, or the macroeconomic factors impacting the global shipping industry.

Rather, their primary concerns may be issues such as [corruption](#) in the port sector, improving local [fisheries management](#), [migrants and refugees](#) losing their lives at sea, or increased economic opportunity and [sustainability in coastal communities](#). Maritime-oriented NGOs often conceptualise risk based on their impacts on the individual and the community and, as a result, often direct their focus and resources towards those “soft security” issues in the maritime domain that impact day-to-day life rather than the kind of military, political, and economic developments that loom larger in the strategic approaches of other actors.

NGOs’ Contributions to Maritime Security

While their impact on maritime security and governance is often less direct than states that make policy, government agencies that enforce it, and multilateral organisations that help frame the international order in the maritime domain, NGOs can have more subtle, indirect but still extremely important roles to play in shaping tangible progress towards security and good governance in the maritime domain.

At the most conceptual level, NGOs in the maritime security space can take risks that many other kinds of institutions cannot. Think tanks can research and propose policy recommendations that may fall outside of the conventional wisdom of the field or the bounds of what multilateral organisations, states or agencies can put forward because of important political considerations. An NGO often has the independence to propose reconceptualisation regarding how we discuss piracy, expose corruption in the port and shipping industry, advocate for voiceless maritime migrants, and propose new and audacious initiatives in the realm of regional cooperation or blue economic development.

Maritime-oriented NGOs can also play an important role in serving as a conduit of communication between communities and policymakers. Maritime environmental organisations can demonstrate the impact of marine degradation on coastal communities to national, regional and international bodies. Fishers’ associations can help shape fisheries management plans that account for both sustainability and the livelihoods of their constituents. All NGOs in the maritime space play an important role in communicating how policy options under the consideration of authorities in the maritime sector impact the economic, social, and security interests of coastal communities, facilitating transparency and accountability in the maritime space.

Finally, NGOs across issue areas, but no less in the maritime space, serve as a critical instrument of advocacy and mobilisation of popular opinion. One of the primary challenges maritime policymakers face is the concept of ‘sea blindness’. States, the institutions they administer, and regional and international bodies are often woefully unaware of the challenges faced in the maritime domain. NGOs focused on maritime security can play a critical role in bridging this gap between the terrestrial orientation of most policymakers and citizens and the central, but often unseen, role maritime issues play in our everyday lives.

Along with that communication, they can play a pivotal role in mobilising public opinion around maritime issues that help drive policy attention and resources to maritime security and governance efforts, helping to overcome the tyranny of sea blindness. Without the work of NGOs, it is unlikely that the public would have the same level of

understanding of the issues they cannot see on a daily basis, such as IUU fishing, slavery at sea, marine pollution, and the agonising journey of maritime migrants. As a result, there would likely be fewer resources and less political will to address them.

NGO Operations in the Maritime Security Environment

There are a variety of factors that make maritime-oriented NGOs extremely vulnerable. Primarily, as discussed above, is the notion of sea blindness. Often, NGOs focused on the maritime domain have to communicate concepts that are distant and abstract compared to other social, economic, and security issues. With so much competition for attention from both the public and policy-making communities, maritime NGOs have difficulty mobilising action and resources around issues that are just over the horizon for the majority of their audience. This also plays out in resource volatility. Few maritime security and governance issues garner the kind of sustained public or philanthropic resources available to NGOs working in other areas.

Their strength, however, as alluded to previously, is their flexibility. NGOs can operate in many realms, communicate between many stakeholders, and fill needed roles in the maritime security and governance issue space, which are hyperlocal and issue-specific, or global and across the spectrum of maritime security issues. They can operate without being bounded by political imperatives to push innovation in maritime policymaking and serve as a critical node of communication between communities and policymakers, advocating for the central role maritime security and governance issues deserve in our collective consciousness.

Evolution of NGOs' Roles in Maritime Security

In the most basic sense, the biggest evolution in the maritime NGO space in the last two decades is that it has grown. Maritime-focused NGOs have expanded rapidly in recent years in number, scale, and influence. For years, the maritime space was perceived by many in the NGO sector as faraway and dominated by specialised actors (navies, shipping, etc.) – a space in which they had little value to add. But this outlook appears to have shifted dramatically in recent decades, with a recent flood of NGO actors entering the maritime space. Just a decade ago, many of the NGO actors that are now consistently contributing to the policy conversation around maritime security, such as the Center for International Maritime Security, CSIS' Asia Maritime Transparency Initiative, Global Fishing Watch, the Institute for Security Studies maritime programme, Safe Seas, and Stable Seas, simply did not exist.

But it is not only a growth in number and interest. These NGO actors are increasingly finding creative ways to expand their influence on maritime security and governance policymaking as well. In some cases, NGOs have carved out roles in providing strategic analysis and MDA for policymakers; multilateral naval exercises have opened up their doors and welcomed the diverse perspectives of maritime-focused NGOs; and across the issue space NGOs have successfully sought out new ways to impact policymaking in the maritime security space – ways that would have been largely unimaginable two decades ago.

Additional Context

In order to be impactful, maritime security NGOs need to operate similar to start-ups in the private sector. They need to identify gaps in a market – not a financial market but markets of ideas, advocacy, and programming. They need to develop products that meet that market need. These can entail anything from research to communications campaigns to lobbying and convening. They need to secure resourcing to implement those offerings in a competitive and resource-scarce environment in order to have a sustainable impact. Finally, they need to market the value they provide in a strategic manner that ensures the work they do reaches the intended audiences. NGOs in the maritime security field face a multitude of challenges, but, when they offer something needed and pursue that goal judiciously, they can provide incredible value to the entire ecosystem of actors working to make the maritime domain a more secure and well-governed space.

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

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