

The authors' views are their own and do not represent the official position of the Institute of Defence and Strategic Studies of the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU. These commentaries may be reproduced with prior permission from RSIS and due recognition to the authors and RSIS. Please email to Editor IDSS Paper at RSISPublications@ntu.edu.sg.

No. 004/2023 dated 9 January 2023

The Maritime Security Roles of the Fishing Industry in Southeast Asia

Asmiati A. Malik

SYNOPSIS

*The fishing industry is a complex maritime security stakeholder, consisting of different types and sizes of industry actors, who each have their own maritime security concerns. Despite this, **ASMIATI MALIK** argues that a common focus on unfair competition facilitated by illicit activities, as well as environmental damage, means the industry as a whole is an increasingly influential participant in maritime security provision.*

COMMENTARY

The Fishing Industry's Interests in Maritime Security

The fishing industry's interests in maritime security are market-driven, emphasising sustainable business and fair competition. Sustainable business refers to the industry's ability to obtain long-term profit and secure raw materials needed. For sustainable fishing, the industry requires regulations that support their business interests, and the implementation of maritime protection/security against illegal fishing and illicit activities by individuals, private groups, and even state actors.

There are four types of fishing industries in Southeast Asia: fresh and saltwater capture fisheries; aquaculture; logistic/intermediary industry including companies that transport fish and provide cold storage in the seaport; and fish processing and canning industry. These industries incorporate an array of actors in the fishing sector. These include fishers, company owners, labourers and fishing vessel crews.

These industries have distinct interests in maritime security. The saltwater capture fishing industry is primarily concerned with illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing as it requires fair competition. The freshwater capture fishery is more interested in protecting the ecosystem of rivers and lakes for sustainable fisheries. Aquaculturists are concerned with economic scalability, affordable fishing feed, environmentally friendly business practices and undisrupted supply chains.

Both the logistic/intermediary industry and the processing/canning industry are concerned with the sustainable supply of raw materials. This is influenced by the healthiness of the sea ecosystem and marine environment (for instance, coral and mangrove), which is highly impacted by fishing methods. The depletion of fish stocks due to overfishing and environmental pollution will eventually increase production costs. When fishermen are forced to sail farther to look for fish, it is very costly. This is exacerbated by high fuel prices. All fishing industries, therefore, have an interest in maritime security because the majority of their business operations are located at sea and around the seashore.

The Fishing Industry's Perception of the Most Significant Threats

The saltwater capture industry faces the biggest threats in economic exclusive zones (EEZs), where large numbers of actors – including small, medium and large fishers – compete intensely using practices of varying legality. For instance, the Aru and Tual waters in Indonesia, a rich area for capturing tuna, are extremely crowded during the tuna season.



Tuna being unloaded in a harbour in Indonesia. Illegal, unreported and unregulated practices in the South China Sea will have potentially devastating consequences for the fishing industry in Southeast Asia. *Image from Wikimedia.*

Large fishing gear is needed to catch blue fin tuna, but not all fishers have sufficient capacity. Illegal fishing practices (including the use of [illegal fishing tools and acts](#), the exploitation of fishing labourers, and illegal trading) are difficult to monitor, and unfair practices are largely unavoidable. Large fishing vessels taking larger catches has a knock-on effect – small and medium industries unable to compete may also turn to destructive and illegal practices to ensure they make a living.

The resultant use of illegal use of bombs or poison, as well as mangrove cutting and the introduction of pollutants (chemicals and trash, especially plastics), endanger the sea ecosystem and create serious environmental damage.

IUU fishing is less of a threat to the freshwater fishing and aquaculture industries. While unfair competition and illicit activities remain distinct challenges, environmental damage is perceived as the largest threat. Major problems include pollution, shore erosion from environmental mismanagement, and silting. The aquaculture industry relies on water taken from the sea, rivers, and lakes, which must be free of pollutants and parasites. Freshwater fisheries are additionally concerned with predatory animals such as danio rerio (zebrafish) and unfair competition between fishing companies. Similar to the seawater fishing industry, lack of access to capital hinders their ability to compete with large industry actors.

This forces small and medium-scale fishermen to take shortcuts, engaging in destructive fishing to obtain economic efficiency in the face of rising production costs. The logistic and intermediary industry and processing and canning industry share the above concerns as these threats impact the availability of raw materials.

Governance over the Fishing Industry's Maritime Security Activities

Globally, UNCLOS 1982 regulates and reinforces the water boundaries of each state to prevent cross-border fishing. This has become the main guideline for each country to protect their sea territory from illegal and irregular fishing acts. The International Labor Organisation (ILO) Convention 2007 (No. 188) on Employment in Fishing promotes decent living and working conditions for all fishermen.

Regionally, there are four declarations, including ASEAN Concord II (2003), ASEAN Political Security Community Blueprint (2009-2015), Strategic Plan of Action on ASEAN Cooperation on Fisheries 2016-2022, and ASEAN 2025 Forging Ahead Together, that seek to prevent illegal fishing practices.

Each country has its own regulatory approach to the fishery sector. For instance, Indonesia has Regulation No. 45/2009 concerning fishery. The law regulates the type, size and quantity of fish that can be caught, the standard and procedure of catching fish, the monitoring system for fishing vessels, the prevention of pollution and environmental damage of fish resources and the environment, fishing areas, and fishing tools.

The Fishing Industry's Operations in the Maritime Security Environment

Fishers can help protect the maritime environment by promoting sustainable practices. Fishermen who live near the catching zone have different approaches to support

sustainable fishing and avoid overfishing. They can implement local wisdom which allows fishing in a predetermined and agreed timeframe. In Raja Ampat, Indonesia, this is [known as sasi](#). They use appropriate fishing gear and impose financial and cultural sanctions on actors who use destructive fishing gear or catch fish outside of the timeframe. Medium-scale fishery actors usually use Fish Aggregating Devices (FAD) to gather fish without damaging the sea ecosystem.

Large commercial actors contribute to state income, which can, in theory, be used to contribute to maritime security provision. The fishing industry in Southeast Asia also usually has close ties with politics and political movements because it is a large provider of employment, income, and protein.

There are more than 10 million people in Southeast Asia who work in the fishery sector, of which [90 per cent work in small or medium scale](#) operations. These actors can develop a political voice and lobby for a secure maritime environment. In Indonesia, for instance, there are several big fishing unions that are also part of fishing organisations such as the Indonesian Fishermen Association, Indonesian Traditional Fishermen Association, and Indonesian Fishermen Union. Some, such as the Indonesian Fisherman Association, advocate on behalf of the small and medium fishery industry. Others, such as the Indonesian Fishery Entrepreneurs Association (GAPPINDO), advocate for the interest of entrepreneurs in the fishery sector. Some associations specifically focus on certain types of fish, such as the Indonesian Tuna Commission (KTI), Indonesian Tuna Association (ASTUIN), and Indonesian Long-line Tuna Association (ATLI).

There are at least 25 associations in aquaculture in Indonesia. The corruption case of lobster export involving former Indonesian Fisheries Minister Edy Prabowo exemplifies how politics and lobbying can influence decision making among elites. In Thailand, [political voices have been expressed](#) in the form of street protests. Its leading fishery association, the Thai Union, also communicates with the Fishery Association in Indonesia. The National Fisheries Association of Thailand (NFAT) and the ITF Fishers Rights Network (FRN) advocate labour rights in the fishery sector. The fishery industry can also influence diplomatic negotiations in bilateral, multilateral, and ASEAN forums: for example, representatives of the tuna industry joining the ASEAN Tuna Working Group (ATWG).

Most activities related to the fishery sector (including catching fish, commercial fishing, and fish processing) require a licence from the government. Some countries regulate the fishing sector quite tightly, such as Thailand and Indonesia. Without strict monitoring, however, actors may forge documents and underreport. Each fishing vessel should activate its vessel monitoring system (VMS) and the government can socialise this in fishing villages and harbours. Each country also has its own fishing community and association to strengthen the communication between members and to raise awareness of their agenda and the marine environment at the national level. Governments should actively monitor them, and increasing awareness among fishermen should be a priority.

The Fishing Industry's Contribution to Maritime Security

The fishery industry contributes to maritime security by following regulations (particularly around sustainable fishing practices), raising awareness, building unions, and building partnerships with other companies. In domestic politics, they push their agendas by actively communicating with politicians, members of parliament, and the government. They also develop international linkages through multilateral forums. Their agenda in these partnerships contribute to maritime security because it includes creating sustainable fishing practices and fair competition, protection of the sea environment, protection against illegal fees, and security against any unfair treatment such as unpaid and long hours for fishing crews.

Evolution of the Fishing Industry's Maritime Security Roles

The fishery sector's role has significantly increased as its contribution to a nation's GDP is better understood. In Indonesia, for instance, in 2014, former Minister of Fishery Susi Pudjiastuti explained that there is potential to increase Non-Tax State Revenue of 25 trillion rupiah per year which has not been utilised from fish and non-fish resources. At the same time, there is growing recognition of security challenges faced by the industry. In particular, [the case of slavery in 2015](#), involving more than 1000 fishing crewmembers in Maluku, Indonesia, rescued from Thai fishing vessels, raised awareness of abuse and exposed the dark side of the fishing industry in the region. Any indication that even licit industry actors were implicated in problematic practices motivated states to be more aware of any suspicious, illicit acts. This could be furthered by implementing background checks on companies and ensuring their trustworthiness before they can engage in fishing practices.

Additional Context

Two important additional dynamics should be furthered with the inclusion of the fishery industry. First, overlapping domestic regulations should be deconflicted and coordinated to strengthen regulatory approaches to prevent foreign and domestic actors from involving themselves in IUU fishing. Second, consensus should be developed among Southeast Asian nations and regional fisher stakeholders by involving them in meetings that focus on developing common understandings regarding their collective interests in protecting the maritime sector.

These dynamics are likely to be difficult due to the complexity of actors in the industry. For instance, in Indonesia, there are several institutions that are involved and have overlapping roles and interests in maritime security, including the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Ministry of Law and Human Rights, Ministry of Finance, Ministry of Transportation, Ministry of Environment and Forestry, Ministry of Marine Affairs and Fisheries, Coordinating Ministry for Maritime & Investment Affairs, Ministry of Tourism (related to sea tourism), the Indonesian National Armed Forces, the Air and Water Police Corps Baharkam Polri, the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), Department of Fishery and Tourism in the Province region, Indonesian state-owned enterprises PT Pertamina, Indonesia Port Corporation (Pelindo), Indonesian Fishermen Alliance and many more.

Asmiati Malik is an Assistant Professor for International Political Economy at the Universitas Bakrie Indonesia, with a focus on energy and fishery policy governance. She also works as Advisor for the Deputy Chief Staff of Economy of the Executive Office of the President of the Republic of Indonesia. This IDSS Paper is #9 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](#).

S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, NTU Singapore
Block S4, Level B3, 50 Nanyang Avenue, Singapore 639798
T: +65 6790 6982 | E: rsispublications@ntu.edu.sg | W: www.rsis.edu.sg