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The Maritime Security Roles of Academia in Southeast Asia

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SYNOPSIS

As maritime security policy issues become increasingly complex and the body of related scholarly research grows, the academic community is emerging as an important maritime security stakeholder. CHRISTIAN BUEGER discusses the range of research activities, the motivations and interest of the researchers involved and how the academic community contributes to maritime security policy and operations at sea.

COMMENTARY

Academia's Interests in Maritime Security

The rise of maritime security as a discourse and practice has led to a growing field of research, studying threats linked to maritime security and the different responses. While academia is not a 'stakeholder' in the classical sense, two kinds of interests in maritime security research prevail. 'Curiosity-driven' research is interested in maritime security as a contemporary socio-political phenomenon, while 'policy-oriented' research is geared at assisting policymakers to improve responses.

The first camp will often be interested in the study of the causes of maritime insecurity or develop new concepts and models of why and how particular responses, such as multilateral agreements, joint operations, or information sharing, evolve. Legal scholars add discussions on the limitations of laws and the implications of law enforcement or conflict resolution at sea.

Those in the second camp, policy-oriented researchers, are often motivated by practical relevance, for instance, responding to requests for briefings by governments. They aim to identify bottlenecks and develop proposals on how policies, strategies,

and governance systems might be improved in order to increase the legitimacy, efficacy, and efficiency of maritime security.

Academia's Perceptions of the Most Significant Threats

Many academic researchers are interested in one particular maritime security threat. Marine piracy is arguably the maritime security issue that has received the most attention. In many ways, expressions of contemporary piracy and its link to non-state violent groups in Southeast Asia have been [the key driver for the establishment of the academic field](#).

[Issues that have received growing attention](#) include inter-state disputes and grey zone activities, with a particular focus on the situation in the South China Sea. A broader range of blue crimes has also increasingly become the object of analysis, in particular illicit fishing activities, illicit migration patterns, as well as a diverse range of smuggling activities.

However, while certain issues are more prominent in the debate than others, researchers do not necessarily prioritise a particular threat. A key distinction within academia lies in objectivist and interpretivist analyses. On the one hand, objectivist studies aim to identify threats and issues that deserve the most attention in a particular region.

They investigate, for instance, official statistics and indicate which issues are expanding and becoming more severe. They also evaluate the harm caused by the identified issues and, on that basis, argue for more attention and different responses. Think tanks, such as Stable Seas, [develop overviews of the threat landscape](#) in specific areas, such as the Sulu and Celebes Seas, to provide orientation and priorities for practitioners.

Interpretivist scholars, on the other hand, do not intend to conduct threat assessments. Instead, they focus on how political actors construct and prioritise threats, and what practical responses are implemented in consequence. Researchers that rely on critical security studies [argue that such analyses provide important clues in terms of the politics of maritime security](#).

They ask: what actors are capable of establishing themselves as key authorities to define threats, and what issues and concerns are thereby marginalised? Such analyses can be key in identifying maldevelopments, or understanding why policies are ineffective and which silences and marginalisation they entail.

Academia's Contribution to Maritime Security

Academics contribute to maritime security on three different levels. First, they provide important expertise and understanding of problems policymakers and operational maritime security providers face. While the majority of maritime security professionals have a very good general understanding of the nature of problems that need to be addressed, there can often be a lack of more nuanced and fine-grained knowledge. Academic research can provide important contextualisation of a problem in history, space and time. It might also provide a better understanding of the behaviour,

organisation, and modus operandum of criminals and other groups that cause harm in the marine environment.



Academic conferences, such as a 2019 workshop analysing the maritime security outlook for Southeast Asia, help to identify security issues and analyse prospective solutions. *Image from RSIS*

Second, academic studies are important in identifying what works in a given context. This might entail in-depth understanding of why and how earlier solutions succeeded, how far such solutions can be adopted elsewhere, and what forms of adjustment are required. In other words, academics can provide insight into developing best practices. Since practitioners often lack distance as well as time to analyse activities they are engaged in, academic analyses are often useful in feeding reflexivity into operations and political processes. Particularly, they make visible gaps or omissions – what participants have not thought about so far. Hence, academics might be able to identify alternative courses of action not yet considered, e.g., the inclusion of additional actors or trialling of new instruments.

Third, academics can sometimes be directly involved in maritime security governance. They can assist in creating awareness and understanding of maritime security or a particular issue, for instance, through media contributions. Through science diplomacy and expert dialogues, academics can foster mutual understanding. By delivering training and education, academics also contribute to capacity building.

Academia's Operations in the Maritime Security Environment

Academics can feed important knowledge into policy and operational discourses by providing orientation and thinking tools. Given that maritime security is a complex domain, they [can clarify concepts, such as 'maritime security' or 'maritime domain awareness'](#). On a more practical level, [academics also identify problems](#), such as why approaches fail and need to be adjusted. Often, practitioners can benefit from the

broader outlook across regions. Academic analyses [can help transfer lessons](#) by documenting how particular promising practices have worked in one region and could be trialled in another.

The Evolution of Academia's Maritime Security Role

Maritime security has gradually evolved as a transdisciplinary field of study. Anchored in security studies, it has seen a significant growth since the 1990s when the first studies that used maritime security as an explicit framing were published. [Studies important](#) for the [development of the field](#) involved Southeast Asian piracy in particular.

Different disciplines contribute to this field, including scholars based in international relations and security studies focusing on states and regional organisations, legal scholars specialising in laws of the sea, anthropologists focusing on communities, and criminologists interested in criminal behaviour.

A key driver of the field's growth was the [significant attention that policymakers have given to maritime security since the 2010s](#) when several states and regional organisations published dedicated maritime security strategies, and several naval operations and regional initiatives were launched.

A number of organisations have evolved as key sites, where maritime security is debated. For Southeast Asia, they include the maritime security programme at S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the Australian National Centre for Ocean Resources & Security (ANCORS) at the University of Wollongong, the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) in Jakarta, the Indian Observer Research Foundation (ORF), as well as the globally oriented SafeSeas network and Stable Seas.

Additional Context

To understand the role of academia, it is important to recognise that researchers are anchored in different disciplines and environments, which puts constraints on their work.

University-based academics tend to have more abstract knowledge. They will be interested to play an active role in maritime security processes as part of a research project that leads to academic publications. University-based academics, such as those working in ANCORS, tend to have more experience with training and education design and delivery, since this is part of their everyday job.

Academics based in think tanks or publicly funded 'research-only' institutions, such as RSIS or CSIS, tend to have engagement as part of their mandate. These researchers are often well trained in writing understandable policy reports, engaging with stakeholders and media, and giving public presentations. Sometimes, think tank researchers work directly for governments or are dependent on such funding; hence, they are more closely aligned with governmental positions and interests.

Academic researchers are hardly generalists and often very specialised. It is important to understand what they are qualified to do. Maritime security involves different

specialisations, which include [data analysis that identify criminal patterns](#), [governance analyses that develop institutional designs](#), [legal analyses that show the application and limits of laws](#), and [area studies that can provide context and facts on particular states or regions](#).

It is important to recognise that, unless researchers are deeply embedded in a particular field, they will always lack the same depth of practical understanding that practitioners have. Yet, such distance can be of high value to see the forest for the trees, contextualising the problem or identifying alternatives and options.

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

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