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No. 021/2024 dated 4 March 2024

## Ensuring ASEAN Maritime Security Resilience

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### SYNOPSIS

*The Ukraine war and Israel-Hamas conflict have indirectly affected Southeast Asian states due to disruptions in maritime navigation and supply links. To mitigate such effects in the future, ASEAN must identify emerging geopolitical fault lines and find ways to ensure its maritime security resilience.*

### COMMENTARY

Two days before the end of 2023, ASEAN foreign ministers published [a statement](#) on “Maintaining and Promoting Stability in the Maritime Sphere in Southeast Asia”. The statement addressed ongoing geopolitical tensions that occurred within or are affecting the maritime domain of Southeast Asia, primarily the South China Sea dispute. Through the statement, ASEAN called on major powers to contribute to the overall maritime security of the region. It also highlighted and welcomed the continued dialogue between the United States and China, particularly high-level meetings between Joe Biden and Xi Jinping.

The foreign ministers’ statement showcased ASEAN’s understanding that maritime insecurities can undermine peace, security, and stability in the region. Thus, the statement called for self-restraint and the promotion of dialogue to bridge differences and misunderstandings. Several critics lamented the fact that the statement failed to highlight China’s coercive act. But this is unsurprising, given ASEAN’s tendency to go for the lowest common denominator in its statements, owing to its policy of consensus decision-making.

The recent statement followed the lines of past ASEAN statements, such as the Chairman’s Statement of the 43rd ASEAN Summit, and the Joint Statement on the 20th Anniversary of the Declarations on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea. Nonetheless, the foreign ministers’ statement is significant on at least two accounts. One, it is the first stand-alone ASEAN statement on the South China Sea. This is significant, as it is a good step to build solidarity and ensure that the notion of “ASEAN unity” is alive and well. Two, the region understands that a stable and peaceful maritime region is a recipe to peace, security, and stability.



The recent ASEAN Foreign Ministers’ Statement echoed the Chairman Statement of the 43rd ASEAN Summit in Jakarta, Indonesia, September 2023, which reaffirmed the need to exercise self-restraint and to pursue peaceful resolution of disputes on the South China Sea issue. *Image from Wikimedia Commons.*

Given that conflicts, crises, and fault lines have emerged throughout maritime domains connecting Southeast Asia to the rest of the world, it would only bode well for ASEAN to start paying more attention to other global issues that would test the resilience of the international maritime system.

### **Too Close for Comfort**

Coming out of the COVID-19 pandemic, the world does not seem to be short of geopolitical surprises. With the 2022 Ukraine war and the 2023 Israel-Hamas conflict, 2024 seems to come with the caveat that the world has not seen the last of conflicts, crises, or wars. Questions then arise as to what kind of “[surprise wars](#)” the world can expect that would mirror the effects of Ukraine and Gaza. Three fault lines have been assessed as being too close for comfort.

First would be the increasing tension between China and Taiwan. In his New Year speech, President Xi hinted at an alarming and rapidly growing ambition, suggesting possible forced reunification with Taiwan by mentioning that “China will surely be reunified”. This could be seen as a warning for Taiwan not to pursue independence, especially after Democratic Progressive Party William Lai’s presidential win in the 2024 election. However, Beijing’s response to the results has so far been restrained with the usual run-of-the-mill rhetoric and no dramatic military manoeuvres. This may

be attributed to China's effort to prioritise China-US relations over its cross-strait ambitions.

Second, there have been growing concerns over North Korea's missile developments. In December 2023, Pyongyang test-fired its most advanced intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM), the Hwasong-18. This marked North Korea's fifth ICBM test in 2023, the highest number ever recorded in a single year. Kim Jong-un's resolve to provoke the United States and its allies through a series of missile tests could certainly be attributed to stronger ties between Pyongyang and Moscow. This is augmented by Kim's call to label South Korea as the North's "number one enemy", and his decision to deny the possibility of both North and South Korea uniting in January 2024.

Third would be the South China Sea dispute. Despite the promising outlook for the South China Sea issue at the start of 2023, the situation has deteriorated rapidly since February 2023 when the Philippines accused a Chinese coast guard vessel of using a military-grade laser against a Philippine coast guard vessel near the Second Thomas Shoal. At the same time, the United States continues to demonstrate its military presence and commitments with its partners through military exercises, carrier deployments, and joint agreements. This adds further layers of complexity to ASEAN's and China's efforts in finalising a code of conduct that is currently being negotiated.

### **Efforts to Ensure Maritime Resilience**

Southeast Asian countries have focused on ensuring that the ongoing and potential geopolitical fault lines do not disrupt the livelihoods of their people and their economic interest. For example, when grain shipment from Ukraine was blocked by Russia and affected Indonesia, which is located between the Indian Ocean and the Pacific Ocean, President Jokowi went to Ukraine and Russia in 2022 to [resume](#) the flow of food commodities, ensuring that commodities would still reach Indonesia and the rest of the world. At the same time, Indonesia started looking at alternative sources of wheat and grain to offset the loss of trade from the war.

In addition, noting the value of freedom of navigation and secure sea lines of communication, Singapore has signalled its intention to play a [part](#) in the escalating situation in the Red Sea amidst increasing attacks on maritime shipping by the Houthis. Such cooperation comes under the US-led Operation Prosperity Guardian that would help ensure the safety of navigation.

Even in 2023, we have seen ASEAN put more emphasis on the security, peace, and stability of the region, specifically in the maritime domain. Two intra-ASEAN military exercises were held: the second ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise held in the Philippines and the ASEAN Solidarity Exercise 2023 held in Indonesia, the latter being the first intra-ASEAN joint military exercise. Both exercises ensure that Southeast Asian countries are ready to band together and face current and future issues together. Moreover, the adoption of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) in August 2023 allows the regional grouping to consolidate and stocktake ASEAN's efforts in the maritime sector, and refresh the document every three years. The AMO thus provides the impetus for ASEAN leaders to come together in dialogue to reach consensus on maritime issues.

With a new outlook document discussed every three years, ASEAN can consider the various maritime insecurities that have appeared or will appear along the geopolitical fault lines. Strong consideration must be given to global maritime insecurities that may directly or indirectly affect Southeast Asia. The ASEAN Foreign Ministers' Statement shows that ASEAN is paying greater attention to the stability of its surrounding maritime domain. It is thus timely for ASEAN to start considering areas beyond its vicinity to ensure its future maritime security resilience.

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