Augmenting maritime domain awareness in Southeast Asia
Boosting national capabilities in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia

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Promoting maritime domain awareness (MDA) has become an increasingly high priority area for many Southeast Asian states. The rising salience of a regional maritime ‘disorder’ that’s increasingly being shaped by the influence of so-called ‘grey area’ phenomena, combined with a growing awareness that these non-state challenges can be dealt with only through a whole-of-government approach, has prompted several regional countries to create multiagency operational fusion centres (FCs) to mitigate these dangers.

Foremost among those initiatives have been the Philippine National Coast Watch Center (NCWC, established in 2012), the Thai Maritime Enforcement Command Centre (MECC, set up in 2019) and the Indonesian Sea Security Coordination Centre (Badan Keamanan Laut Republik Indonesia, BAKAMLA, formed in 2014). While the specific drivers for the creation of these organisations has differed according to the conditional contexts of the three countries concerned, they have all faced a similar set of challenges that has stymied progress in providing a truly coordinated approach to maritime security (MARSEC) threats. Common problems have included:

• a bureaucratic defence mindset that continues to value independent—as opposed to interdependent—courses of action and which has, accordingly, contributed to a lack of interagency coordination
• an inability to attract and retain high-quality personnel and analysts
• inexperience with the use of open-source intelligence (OSINT) and unclassified surveillance platforms that exist in the commercial sector
• insufficient physical and human resources, exacerbated by an ongoing tendency to focus on the procurement of prestige, high-tech maritime platforms.

Australia has a vested interest in assisting the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA in overcoming those shortcomings. Canberra has identified eight key maritime threats facing the nation, including irregular migration; illegal exploitation of natural resources; marine pollution; illicit trafficking; compromises to biodiversity; piracy and armed maritime crime; and maritime terrorism. Many of those challenges find acute expression in Southeast Asian waters, and helping the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia counter them would directly contribute to Australia’s own national security interests. In addition, strengthening the three national FCs would effectively expand the scope and reach of Canberra’s own MDA effort, which will always be subject to limits in geographical reach, given the size of the country’s overall maritime area of responsibility.

There are several ways that Australia could contribute to building the MDA capabilities of the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA. One area of assistance that could have an immediate short-term impact in augmenting tactical response is helping the three FCs boost the inventory of their offshore patrol ships. The government’s successful Pacific Maritime Security Program could be used as a model to guide those procurements.

Canberra could also provide useful input on best practices for developing integrated national intelligence FCs that bring together data from a wide array of agencies and departments. Australia has considerable experience in developing and running joint taskforces and coordination hubs that cross the civil–military and public–private divides. The government operates the multistakeholder Maritime Border Command, which uses an intelligence-led, risk-based approach for generating and promoting holistic MDA in Australia’s territorial waters. In addition, the
dedicated Maritime Identification System has been in place since 2005 and has since then provided an all-source information network that draws on several data feeds, including coastal radars, air surveillance platforms, satellite imagery and various vessel tracking and monitoring networks. Finally, in 2019 the government began the Future Maritime Surveillance Capability Project, which will provide a scalable and sustainable interagency solution for addressing current and emerging threats to the nation’s littoral environment. The expertise gleaned from running those various initiatives could be offered up to assist the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia in overcoming the bureaucratic logjams that continue to stymie the full fruition of their respective whole-of-government MARSEC efforts.

A further area of support that could be rendered is augmenting the NCWC’s, the MECC’s and BAKAMLAs’s familiarity and competence with OSINT and relatively cheap unclassified surveillance platforms that exist in the commercial sector (such as satellites). Organising in-country training that’s run by international mobile education teams or sponsoring selected analysts to attend programs in institutions such as the Australian Defence Force Academy and National Security College would both be viable avenues to further this endeavour.

Finally, Canberra could assist with incentivising deployment to the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLAs by offering accredited professional development courses that are open only to those who are officially attached to the centres. This would be a low-cost but highly effective means of promoting the value of the three FCs, especially by underscoring their utility in contributing to an individual’s promotion prospects and overall career path.
Promoting maritime domain awareness (MDA)—which as a concept essentially refers to gaining a shared picture and understanding of anything associated with the littoral environment that could affect the security, safety or economy of a state—has become an increasingly high priority area for many Southeast Asian governments. The rising salience of regional maritime threats—ranging from terrorism, piracy, armed maritime crime (AMC) and illicit smuggling to environmental pollution, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing (hereafter referred to as illegal fishing) and territorial posturing in the South China Sea—has been met with a growing push to develop various operational fusion centres (FCs) to mitigate those dangers.

There are presently three multilateral FCs in Southeast Asia: the Piracy Reporting Centre (located in Kuala Lumpur, Malaysia) of the International Maritime Bureau; the Information Sharing Centre (located in Singapore) of the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery Against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP); and the Information Fusion Centre operated by the Singapore Navy. While all three have helped with the establishment of a flexible information exchange architecture in Southeast Asia, each has limits. The Piracy Reporting Centre and Information Sharing Centre are both focused on piracy and AMC and deal only with post facto reporting; their value in disseminating actionable data on MARSEC hazards as a whole is therefore questionable. And, although the Information Fusion Centre adopts a far broader, multi-issue approach that’s geared towards real-time intelligence diffusion,¹ it suffers from a lack of early threat detection capabilities and has recently been affected by budget cuts that could potentially undercut its future operational effectiveness.²

Those shortfalls could mean that Southeast Asian states’ efforts to expand their MDA efforts may be better served at the national rather than the regional level and that enhanced domestic capabilities could be leveraged to better augment subsequent multilateral initiatives. This report deals with three notable examples of moves in such a direction:

- the Philippine National Coast Watch Center (NCWC), established in 2012
- the Thai Maritime Enforcement Command Centre (MECC), set up in 2019
- the Indonesian Sea Security Coordination Centre (Badan Keamanan Laut Republik Indonesia, BAKAMLA), formed in 2014.

While the specific drivers for the creation of these organisations has differed according to the conditional contexts of the three countries concerned, they have all been concerned with promoting a common operational picture among key stakeholders with roles in furthering national MARSEC interests. In particular, they have sought to generate offshore joint situational awareness for formulating intelligence assessments at the strategic level and cueing operational responses at the tactical level. In seeking to accomplish those objectives, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia have all faced a similar set of challenges that has stymied progress in standing up FCs that are able to provide a truly coordinated approach for responding to MARSEC challenges.
Common problems have included:

- a bureaucratic defence mindset that continues to value independent—as opposed to interdependent—courses of action
- an inability to attract and retain high-quality personnel and analysts
- inexperience with the use of open-source intelligence (OSINT)
- a chronic lack of physical and human resources, exacerbated by an ongoing tendency to focus on the procurement of prestige, high-tech surveillance platforms that are largely irrelevant to advancing the multistage ‘search, detect, classify, track and detain’ continuum that lies at the heart of the MDA spectrum.3

Overcoming these challenges will not only assist with the creation of more effective MDA capabilities in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, but could also help to inform best practices for stimulating similar efforts in other Southeast Asian countries. Both outcomes would be of direct interest to Australia as it seeks to promote its own maritime interests in this part of the world.
A complex MARSEC environment exists in Southeast Asia that draws off a regional ‘disorder’ increasingly shaped by so-called ‘grey area’ phenomena—challenges to national and cross-border stability that emanate from non-state actors and non-governmental influences. These forces and pressures have given rise to a milieu of hazards that share a number of common characteristics: they rarely take the form of overt military aggression stemming from clearly defined sovereign sources; they blur the distinction between civil and military security; they can’t be readily deterred by the physical defences and borders that governments have erected to protect their territories and populations; and they frequently bear off one another to exacerbate their overall threat quotient.

In the contemporary Southeast Asian geopolitical landscape, several fundamental features are contributing to the spread of grey area phenomena in this part of the world:

• the emphasis on economic prosperity and power conceived in terms of wealth (itself amplified by the severe financial disparities generated by the region’s rush to wealth), which has led to the emergence of criminal organisations prepared to engage in various illicit activities as a way of quickly fulfilling their material aspirations
• the resurgence of atavistic, primordial forms of identity, which has fuelled ethnonationalist and religious violent extremist movements across the region
• the proliferation of small arms and light weapons, which has given an array of non-state actors tactical options that were formerly available only to sovereign governments and their military forces
• the expansion of regional transportation links, communication networks, capital flows, financial movements and commodity transactions as part of the ASEAN connectivity agenda, all of which have worked to facilitate the transnational diffusion of grey area phenomena, allowing threats to both emanate from and migrate to Southeast Asia
• the growth of megacities, which has contributed to environmental degradation, overpopulation and pollution in addition to helping spawn squalid shantytowns that have acted as incubators for both crime and disease.

These core influences are feeding and giving concrete expression to an array of grey area threats across Southeast Asia. Between 2014 and June 2019, 578 actual and attempted acts of piracy and AMC were recorded in the region, with Indonesian, Malaysian, Philippine and Vietnamese waters particularly badly affected. While many of the attacks took the form of low-level opportunist robberies of ships at anchor, numerous large-scale events also occurred, including cargo ransacking and the outright hijacking of vessels and their crews. For the past five years, Southeast Asia has consistently ranked as one of the world’s most pirate-infested regions, and currently trails behind only the Gulf of Guinea in West Africa.

Illicit trafficking in narcotics, weapons and people is just as extensive. The Mekong subregion, which includes Myanmar, Laos, southwest China, Cambodia and northern Thailand, has emerged as a major corridor for the movement of opiates and amphetamine-type stimulants such as crystal meth (‘ice’) and yaba (low-purity meth mixed with caffeine). There’s a thriving trade in small arms, many of which are sourced out of Cambodia and shipped via the same routes used by drug syndicates. Sophisticated people-smuggling rings have sprung up and are now playing a key role in moving irregular migrants from Indonesia, Bangladesh and the Philippines to relatively affluent states such as Malaysia and Thailand.
Illegal fishing is another organised crime that’s endemic throughout Southeast Asia and it’s having a markedly negative impact on the region. From small-scale artisanal fishermen to large-scale industrial trawlers, the practice is depriving governments of billions of dollars in annual catch revenue, depleting what in many cases are already dwindling stocks of seafood, undermining marine biodiversity and security, and causing egregious environmental damage through the intensive use of illicit gears and methods, such as explosives and bottom trawling micro-mesh drift nets.9

Illegal fishing has also generated economic pressure that’s fuelling the ongoing and widespread use of slave labour. This modern manifestations of bonded servitude have been especially evident in the Gulf of Thailand—one of the most overfished bodies of water on the planet10—where vessel operators are increasingly turning to human trafficking networks to entrap victims who are then forced to work for little or no money, in many cases for months or even years at a time.11

Besides these effects, illegal fishing has become one of the preferred means by which the Chinese Government has sought to expand its influence in Southeast Asia. Beijing has increasingly facilitated and encouraged the use of nationally operated trawlers to serve as ‘proxies’ for enforcing its own self-defined territorial ‘rights’ in the region. This has been particularly evident in the South China Sea, where Sino-flagged fishing vessels have routinely been employed to counter competing Philippine and Vietnamese claims in the Spratlys, Macclesfield Bank and Paracel Islands.12 Elsewhere, they’ve been leveraged as a deniable means for encroaching on the territorial waters of Indonesia and Thailand, both of which (along with the Philippines) currently count blunting malign foreign (read Chinese) influence as a major MARSEC priority.13

Southeast Asia has also witnessed a surge in militant extremism over the past two decades. New strains of ethnonationalist and religious violence have boiled over in Indonesia, Myanmar, the southern Philippines and the Malay Muslim provinces of Thailand (Pattani, Yala and Narithiwat)—all of which are encouraging a heightened general level of civil disobedience in those regions. More importantly, they’re helping to sustain the activities of established and emergent violent extremist organisations, several of which have made common cause with external terrorist movements such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State.14 Although many of these entities operate on land, several have also engaged in decisive sea-based operations to further their ideological and financial agendas; hijackings and kidnappings by factions of the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Sulu and Celebes seas are a case in point.15 Just as importantly, Southeast Asia’s expansive and complex maritime geography makes it a highly attractive theatre for extremists to attack or exploit for logistical purposes (such as facilitating the covert movement of weapons and fighters).

Finally, Southeast Asia is the locus of a range of negative environmental influences, including hurricanes, typhoons, earthquakes, flooding, disease and general pollution. While many of those problems stem from the region’s geographical position in the so-called ‘ring of fire’,16 several derive from the unintended consequences of rapid industrialisation. Indeed, the recurrent smoke haze that blankets much of the region every year is now widely seen as a direct by-product of Indonesian land-clearing fires that are deliberately set to make way for the establishment of new industrial palm oil, paper and pulp plantations.17
The range and severity of grey area threats in Southeast Asia have led a number of countries in the region to establish multi-agency national FCs aimed at promoting whole-of-government approaches to counter their destabilising effects. Three notable examples are the NCWC in the Philippines, the MECC in Thailand and BAKAMLA in Indonesia.

The NCWC

The Philippines’ NCWC was established by Executive Order 57 in 2012 to act as an interagency MDA centre parallel to Coast Watch South, which was an initiative that emerged in the context of Operation Enduring Freedom—Philippines in the immediate post-9/11 era. The latter was primarily focused on counterterrorism in the tri-border area of the Sulu and Celebes seas and was meant to feed information on threat contingencies to the Philippine Navy.\(^1\) The NCWC was set up as a separate organisation housed within the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG) to act as ‘an electronic maritime eyes and ears capability’ for monitoring the Philippines’ maritime space and to foster coordination among all key stakeholders that have roles in that realm.\(^2\) Physical construction of the centre was completed in 2015,\(^2\) but the facility went ‘live’ (turning on its electronic platforms) only in 2018.\(^2\) It’s therefore still very young.

The NCWC is composed of a council (the executive body), a secretariat (which is responsible for policy) and the centre itself (where intelligence collection, fusion, assessment and dissemination take place). It has a staff of 36, including 12 watch standers and four dedicated civilian analysts, and employs a variety of surveillance and communication platforms, such as SEAVISION,\(^2\) CENTRIX,\(^2\) the Asia Pacific Information Network, and both space-based and terrestrial automatic identification systems.\(^4\)

Ten agencies are mandated to support the NCWC: the PCG, the Philippine Navy, the National Prosecution Service of the Department of Justice, the Bureau of Customs, the Philippines National Police—Maritime Group (PNP-MG), the Bureau of Immigration, the National Bureau of Investigation, the Drug Enforcement Agency, the Bureau of Fisheries and Aquatic Resources, and the Philippine Center of Transnational Crime.\(^5\) Of those entities, it’s the coastguard that constitutes the ‘backbone’ of the NCWC, providing all but four of the center’s employees\(^2\) and the vast bulk of its funding.

The NCWC acts as the hub for the wider National Coast Watch System, which consists of nine stations, seven of which have been funded by the PCG (the Philippine Navy and the PNP-MG underwrite the other two). In addition to the NCWC in Manila, there are two maritime regional coordination centres in Palawan and Cebu that focus on illegal fishing and illicit trafficking, respectively. Other subsites equipped with cameras, radios, automated identification systems and radars are located in Manginisda, Honda Bay, Mt Salakot, Punta Bilar, Dumaguete, Antique and Anini-Y.\(^2\)
There are plans to build another five maritime regional coordination centres (western Mindanao, eastern Mindanao, southern Luzon, northwestern Luzon, northeastern Luzon) over the next five years, in addition to possibly constructing a further three substations (Taganak, Surigao, Matnog). Those facilities will be devoted to augmenting the National Coast Watch System’s ability to monitor vessel traffic transiting through the seven major east-west choke-points that bisect the Philippines, particularly to mitigate threats in six priority areas:

- piracy and AMC
- humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
- illicit trafficking (humans, weapons and contraband)
- drug smuggling
- terrorism
- Chinese presence and influence.

**The MECC**

Thailand’s MECC grew out of the Maritime Enforcement Coordination Centre, which was originally established as a naval entity in 1997 and acted as a loose hub for bringing together and managing various agencies with a MARSEC remit. The new body, which was given a legal footing as a civilian organisation answering directly to the Office of the Prime Minister in March 2019, is intended to act as a true joint interagency taskforce (rather than just a coordinating body) that synchronises the Royal Thai Navy (RTN), the Customs Department, the Marine Department, the Department of Fisheries, the Department of Coastal and Marine Resources and the Royal Thai Marine Police.

The MECC headquarters will be in Bangkok, where a new building to house it is under construction and due for completion by the end of 2022. The centre will be split into three specific geographical areas of responsibility:

- Area 1—the upper half of the Gulf of Thailand
- Area 2—the lower half of the Gulf of Thailand
- Area 3—the west coast of Thailand and the Andaman Sea.

Provincial subunits will be established in each area of responsibility—twelve for Area 1, five for Area 2 and six for Area 3. Thirty port security control centres are also planned at the provincial level that will fall under the authority of the Department of Fisheries and will be used to monitor and inspect trawlers.

Three main sets of responsibilities will be assigned to the MECC: to collect, analyse and share maritime information; to detect, prevent, and suppress any illegal activity at sea; and to assist with offshore search and rescue. In fulfilling this trifold mandate, the MECC will have the power to declare a national maritime emergency and impose martial law. The centre will have its own budget to underwrite the execution of special powers in such situations and won’t have to rely on the provision of funds from the government (which was the case with its predecessor).

The Prime Minister will act as the MECC’s executive director. Within the centre, the command structure will consist of a deputy executive director (the Commander-in-Chief of the RTN) and a secretary (the Chief of Naval Staff). The Committee on Safeguarding the National Interest will be set up as a supreme policymaking body. It will also be headed by the Prime Minister, although functional authority will lie with the National Security Council and the MECC secretary.

The MECC has started recruiting, and the aim is to have an overall staff complement of 1,170 within three years (its current strength is 200). The headquarters will have 484 personnel and the regional subunits will be staffed to 686.
The RTN’s existing Maritime Information Sharing Centre will act as the MECC’s main mechanism for data collection, fusion, evaluation and dissemination. It’s due to come on line as a dedicated intelligence platform for the MECC by the end of 2019 and will draw on data gleaned from a variety of sources, including the Marine Department’s Vessel Traffic Management and Information System; the Department of Fisheries’ Vessel Monitoring System; the RTN’s automated identification system and vessel trafficking systems; coastal radar feeds; SEAVISION; and biometric information banks. There are plans that the Maritime Information Sharing Centre will also incorporate information on critical infrastructure, especially that which is pertinent to oil rigs and gas pipelines running below the seabed.

MECC’s initial focus will be on:
- Piracy and AMC
- maritime terrorism
- maritime incidents, such as accidents and oil spills
- illegal fishing
- smuggling
- human trafficking and slavery
- illicit and irregular migration
- humanitarian assistance and disaster relief
- environmental degradation
- malign foreign activities in Thai waters.

**BAKAMLA**

BAKAMLA, which is the successor to the Maritime Security Coordinating Board (Kordinasi Keamanan Laut, BAKORKAMLA), was established under Presidential Decree no. 178 in December 2014 to act as a coordinating body for streamlining Indonesia’s sprawling MARSEC community into a more coherent whole. It was a central component of Prime Minister Joko ‘Jokowi’ Widodo’s plan to reorient the country’s national interests and root them in a more maritime-centric view of the world—specifically, by transforming the archipelagic nation into a ‘global maritime fulcrum’ straddling the Pacific and Indian oceans.

BAKAMLA brings together the resources and personnel of 12 national law enforcement agencies—primarily through secondment or temporary reassignment—that have roles in MARSEC, integrating those assets into a joint taskforce arrangement to conduct security and safety patrols in Indonesia’s sovereign and territorial seas. An important secondary function is to promote the sharing of information and intelligence among those entities, both to enhance overall domain awareness of identified threats to the archipelago and to better cue interdiction operations against those who violate the country’s maritime laws.

Because BAKAMLA is a coordinating body, it has no statutory power to order its associated agencies to serve its needs. Essentially, the interagency relationship is a cooperative and mutually supportive one and doesn’t lend itself to a hierarchical command coastguard-type structure that some originally thought BAKAMLA would evolve into. As Muhamad Arif observes: ‘BAKAMLA is practically the Indonesian coast guard only to the extent that it serves as the contact point for international coast guard coordination.’

Operationally, BAKAMLA’s area of responsibility is divided into three sectors that are equipped with long-range radar, satellites and surveillance equipment for monitoring vessels entering their spheres of responsibility: the Western Maritime Zone (HQ in Batam; overseeing the islands of Java, Sumatra and Borneo); the Central Maritime Zone (HQ in Manado; overseeing Sulawesi and the Lesser Sunda Islands); and the Eastern Maritime Zone (HQ in Ambon; overseeing Maluku and Papua) (Figure 1). Dedicated patrol sections have been set across those areas, each coinciding with the main focal points of criminal activity currently taking place in Indonesian waters.
Organisationally, BAKAMLA falls under the statutory authority of the Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs (presently headed by Luhut Binsar Pandjaitan) and reports directly to the President through the Coordinating Ministry for Political, Legal and Security Affairs. In the execution of its day-to-day mandate, BAKAMLA operates through five core elements: an executive body that manages the deployment of joint law enforcement patrols and taskforces; a secretariat that deals with planning, organisation and infrastructure; and three directorates that together cover information, law, interagency cooperation, training, policy and strategy.45

Currently, BAKAMLA has an inventory of only 30 small- to medium-sized domestically produced offshore patrol vessels. Because of the size of its area of operations, it therefore has to frequently rely on platforms drawn from its supporting agencies.46 As noted above, the bulk of BAKAMLA’s manpower is made up of secondees from other law enforcement agencies rather than full-time permanent on-site employees. There are plans to eventually grow the organisation to 2,000 personnel, although the specifics of how that number is to be reached remain unclear.47

Largely in tandem with the Philippines and Thailand, threat priorities for BAKAMLA span the spectrum from illegal fishing to illicit trafficking, piracy, AMC, terrorism and environmental contingencies (both natural and human caused). Of those, illegal fishing is the prime focus of concern—the agency has a dedicated taskforce that’s specifically mandated to identify, track and intercept suspected vessels of interest—reflecting a crime that’s conservatively estimated to cost Indonesia A$4.4 billion (US$3 billion) a year in lost revenue.48 It’s also a major concern of President Widodo, who has cast the practice as one of the country’s greatest national security challenges because of its adverse maritime environmental effects, direct impact in diminishing already depleted fish stocks and contributory role in driving an assortment of related threats, such as corruption, money laundering and tax evasion.49
The NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA have all been concerned with promoting a common operating picture among key stakeholders with roles in furthering national MARSEC interests. In particular, they’ve sought to generate offshore joint situational awareness for formulating intelligence assessments at the strategic level and cueing operational responses at the tactical level. In seeking to accomplish those objectives, the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia have all faced a similar set of difficulties that has stymied progress in standing up centres that are able to provide for a truly coordinated approach to MARSEC. Those challenges are in areas where international partnerships, including affiliations with Australian counterpart agencies, could play a meaningful role in providing cost-effective remedies.

The first and arguably greatest obstacle has been a bureaucratic mindset that continues to think in independent, rather than interdependent, terms. The stovepiping of intelligence, interagency competition and conflicting spheres of jurisdictional responsibility have, as a consequence, all variously beset the three organisations.

In the Philippines, only the PCG has really bought into the concept of an integrated MARSEC hub. As noted, the coastguard currently acts as the backbone of the centre with most of its other supporting agencies playing a minor, if not marginal, role. That situation has evolved largely as a result of the efforts of the PCG’s Commander-in-Chief, who has long lobbied for a coordinated interagency strategy to address maritime threats in the country’s national waters—a personal commitment that hasn’t been universally shared by the heads of the NCWC’s 10 constituent departments.50

In Indonesia, more than four years since BAKAMLA was inaugurated, maritime governance continues to be held hostage to problems that have long plagued the country’s MARSEC community, such as interagency rivalry, overlapping legal frameworks, separate intelligence and information management systems and chronic competition for limited and scattered resources.51

Thailand’s MECC has had somewhat more success in encouraging support for a whole-of-government approach to MDA, largely because it was this type of coordination that was ultimately instrumental in helping to lift the EU’s ‘yellow card’ designation for illegal fishing.52 However, decisively shifting the bureaucratic paradigm from ‘multiple agencies, single function’, to ‘single agency, multiple functions’ is proving challenging, particularly as the MECC moves to transition from a coordinating to a command centre.53

A second problem has been in incentivising the recruitment of high-calibre, motivated personnel. This has proven challenging largely because assignment to an FC is often viewed as a ‘career killer’ that limits an individual’s promotion prospects in his or her home service. Limited human resources also make supporting agencies reluctant to send their best people on secondment engagements or as liaison officers—even for short periods. If people do volunteer for assignment, it’s generally a calculated move to distance themselves from corruption, rather than an active desire to join an FC.54 None of this provides a strong foundation for building staff morale, much less a professional and enthusiastic workforce.
A third and related difficulty has been in attracting and retaining well-qualified analysts to assess and disseminate all-source maritime intelligence that can then be used to drive operations against a variety of state and transnational threats. This problem has been especially acute in the Philippines. The NCWC currently has only four dedicated civilian analysts on its payroll and, while there are plans to expand the number to 10 over the next three years, that will still be far from sufficient to process information derived from a 24/7/365 watch. Moreover, it won’t provide any redundancy for analysts to attend intelligence training courses, either in the Philippines or internationally, removing a tangible, highly prized benefit that for many is the principal reason they enter this field.

A fourth shortfall relates to the use of OSINT and relatively cheap unclassified surveillance platforms that exist in the commercial sector (such as satellites), which in all three countries are largely overlooked as valuable inputs to tactical or strategic risk assessments. This is unfortunate, as those data sources can potentially contribute as much as 90% of the information that’s required for assessing the scope, dimension and immediacy of a particular MARSEC threat. This is especially true of those hazards that aren’t militarised security challenges (for example, illegal fishing, piracy, AMC and natural disasters), many of which find particular expression in the Southeast Asian littoral environment.

A fifth major issue concerns physical and human resources. The NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA all have sizeable zones of operations but lack the necessary platforms to police those areas effectively. Indonesia stands out as a stark case in point. The country controls roughly 6 million square kilometres of archipelagic waters, territorial seas and continental shelf. However, BAKAMLA has only 30 patrol boats of its own. Although it can request assets from its supporting agencies, that won’t come close to the 300 vessels that various experts estimate are needed to monitor this expansive maritime space. Earmarking funds to augment a more robust offshore inventory constantly runs up against the tendency to invest in procurements that are prestigious, highly expensive, or both (such as ScanEagle, Aerostats, CENTRIX, F-16 jets and submarines), rather than low-tech but infinitely more practical surface assets—a problem that also applies in Thailand and the Philippines.

On the human capital side, the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA all suffer from a shortfall of qualified personnel, reflecting the recruitment quandary noted above. While the three FCs have plans to expand their workforces—to 1,170 in Thailand, 2,000 in Indonesia and a yet to be determined percentage from a 30,000 expansion in the PCG in the Philippines—it remains unclear how those staff increases are to be funded, housed and trained. Until those questions are resolved, scheduled surges in human capital will remain at best aspirational and at worst fiscally and physically untenable.

The US, which has historically been the main underwriter of security in Southeast Asia, has sought to assist the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia to overcome many of these problems, primarily by engaging the three countries in intensive MDA capacity-building efforts. Most of those endeavours are currently channelled through the Institute for Security Governance and fall within the broader parameters of the Maritime Security Initiative. Washington has been keen to develop the offshore surveillance and interdiction capacities of the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA, viewing the three FCs as useful force multipliers for advancing general MARSEC interests in Southeast Asia, blunting Chinese territorial adventurism in the South China Sea, and solidifying a subregional network of bilateral ties that can then be leveraged to further American goals in a part of the world of growing geostrategic importance.

While the US commitment to Southeast Asia received a considerable fillip with Barak Obama’s ‘Asian pivot’ in 2012, it’s become increasingly tenuous under President’s Trump’s ‘America first’ policy. Moreover, human rights concerns arising out of the Philippines’ current war on drugs, the uncertain path of Thailand’s full return to civilian democratic rule and undercurrents of extremism that are threatening the secular order in Indonesia have acted as at least perceived limits on the extent to which Washington can meaningfully work with those countries in the security sector. Under such circumstances, it may well default to other states to support their MDA efforts. Australia has both reason and capacity to take on such a role.
Australia has a vested interest in promoting and buttressing the MARSEC capabilities of the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA. Canberra has identified eight key maritime threats facing the nation, including irregular migration, illegal exploitation of natural resources, marine pollution, illicit trafficking, compromises to biodiversity, piracy, AMC and maritime terrorism. As noted, many of those challenges find acute expression in Southeast Asian waters, and helping the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia to counter them would directly contribute to Canberra’s own national security interests. Strengthening the three national FCs would also effectively expand the scope and reach of Australia’s own MDA effort, which will always be subject to limits in geographical reach, given the size of the country’s overall maritime area of responsibility. Finally, augmenting the MARSEC capabilities of Manila, Bangkok and Jakarta would help to blunt at least some of China’s growing assertiveness in Southeast Asia, in that it would augment the national capabilities of three prominent states to push back against Beijing and its effort to recalibrate the region’s power structure in its favour.

Australia has, on a number of occasions, explicitly declared that strengthening regional MDA should be a priority. In the 2016 Defence White Paper, the government affirmed that it ‘will work with regional partners to develop shared maritime domain capabilities that provide a basis for greater maritime security cooperation’. The following year, Canberra released the 2017 Foreign Policy White Paper, its first in 14 years, which again highlighted the need for expanded regional MDA cooperation:

Australia will increase its investments in maritime security capacity building in Southeast Asia. We will also work to strengthen the focus on maritime issues within regional forums … and enhance regional training on maritime domain awareness, protection of the maritime environment and international law.

Canberra could provide the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia with several forms of assistance to help them buttress their national MDA efforts.

One type of backing that would pay immediate short-term dividends in augmenting tactical response is to help the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA boost their inventory of offshore patrol ships. Australia’s Pacific Maritime Security Program could be used as a model to guide those procurements. This A$2 billion, 30-year initiative involves, among other things, a commitment to replace 22 small boats that were originally gifted to small Pacific island nations between 1987 and 1998 with larger, more capable, Guardian-class vessels over the next five years. The new platforms are able to operate in sea state 4 conditions, have a range of up to 3,000 nautical miles (at a speed of 12 knots) and are equipped with what’s been described as a ‘game-changing’ stern-launched zodiac capacity (Figure 2). They’re ideally suited for drug interdiction and counter-illegal-fishing operations and, if made available to the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia, would significantly increase the ability of those three states to monitor and police their waters. Importantly, the boats could be sustained and supported through industry partnerships, engendering other useful connections between security organisations and businesses in the national security and maritime sectors.
Canberra could also provide useful input on best practices for developing integrated national intelligence FCs that bring together data from a wide array of agencies, departments and commercial sources. As noted, a major obstacle hindering the development of the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA is a reticence to fully and truly share information and data with stovepiping remaining more the norm than the exception. Australia has considerable experience in developing and running joint taskforces and coordination hubs that cross the civil–military and public–private divides.

An important supplementary feature of the Pacific Maritime Security Program noted above is a focus on enhancing the ability of recipient states to effectively collect, analyse, manage and disseminate maritime security data nationally, bilaterally and regionally. The Australian Government also operates the multistakeholder Maritime Border Command, which uses an intelligence-led, risk-based approach for generating and promoting holistic MDA in the country’s territorial waters. In addition, the dedicated Maritime Identification System has been in place since 2005 and has since then provided an all-source information network that draws on several data feeds, including coastal radars, air surveillance platforms, satellite imagery and various vessel tracking and monitoring networks. Finally, in 2019 Australia began the Future Maritime Surveillance Capability Project, which will provide a scalable and sustainable interagency solution for addressing current and emerging threats to the nation’s littoral environment.

The expertise gleaned from running these various initiatives could be offered up to assist the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia in overcoming the bureaucratic logjams that continue to stymie the full fruition of their respective whole-of-government MARSEC efforts.

A further area of support that could be rendered is to increase the three FCs’ familiarity with and competence in using OSINT. Australia has broad experience in integrating and fusing all-source non-classified data to provide comprehensive MDA for maritime border security. Canberra could impress on officials in the Philippines, Thailand and Indonesia the worth of this material and demonstrate how it can inform the compilation of rounded MARSEC.
threat assessments. Organising in-country OSINT training that’s run by international mobile education training teams or sponsoring selected analysts to attend programs in institutions such as the Australian Defence Force Academy and the National Security College would be viable avenues to achieve that outcome.

Finally, Canberra could assist by incentivising deployments to the NCWC, the MECC and BAKAMLA by offering accredited professional development courses that are open only to those who are officially attached to those centres. This would be a low-cost but highly effective means of promoting the value of the three FCs, especially by highlighting their utility in contributing to people’s promotion prospects and overall career paths. Not only would this aid in the recruitment (and retention) of high-quality employees, but it would also lead to a more robust and energised working environment that, in the words of one senior PCG official, ‘could eventually evolve into the type of attractive “honey pot” that draws in a consistent line of capable and motivated staff over the long term’.79
Data received by the IFC is fused into the centre’s Open and Analysed Shipping Information System and then integrated into the Western Pacific Naval Symposium Regional Maritime Information Exchange and the Malacca Straits Patrol Information System. It’s currently the most sophisticated transnational information-sharing system in Southeast Asia and brings together more than 78 agencies in 38 countries.


For more on the multistage MDA surveillance spectrum, see John Coyne, *Mice that roar: patrol and coastal combatants in ASEAN*, ASPI, Canberra, 2018, 13, online.


Cambodia is a major regional source of small arms and light weapons due to the state’s strategic location in the heart of mainland Southeast Asia, the lack of regulation over arms brokers and intermediaries operating in the kingdom and the failure of UN disarmament programs following the end of the Third Indo-China War. Today, it’s estimated that there are between 22,000 and 85,000 weapons in Cambodia that remain outside central government control.

UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), *Transnational organized crime in Southeast Asia*, UN, New York, 2019, online.


The overall catch per unit of effort in the Gulf of Thailand has plummeted by 86% since 1966—one of the worst rates of decline of any region in the world.


Helped by generous subsidies on shipbuilding and fuel from Beijing, Chinese fishermen are now travelling further from their own shores to illicitly land viable catches. Much of this criminal poaching is taking place in resource-rich areas of the South China Sea in which maritime disputes are already a flashpoint among claimant states.

Author interviews, Bangkok, June 2019, and Manila, August 2019.

For more on these zones of terror in Southeast Asia, see Peter Chalk, ‘Terrorism in Southeast Asia: evolving scope and dimensions’, in Erich Marquardt (ed.), *Combating terrorism and irregular warfare: the long war against al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and affiliates*, Combating Terrorism Center at West Point, New York, 2018.

The Abu Sayyaf Group, which claims to be fighting for the creation of a caliphate in the southern Philippines and factions of which have pledged allegiance to Islamic State, was behind a spate of highly audacious hijackings and kidnappings in the Sulu and Celebes seas between 2016 and 2017. The loosely configured group was also responsible for the most lethal maritime attack in terrorist history—the 2004 firebombing of Philippine SuperFerry 14, which left 116 people dead.

The ‘ring of fire’ denotes a 40,000-kilometre long horseshoe-shaped area that includes a nearly continuous series of oceanic trenches, island arcs, volcanic mountain ranges and shifting tectonic plates.

See, for instance, Luke Hunt, ‘Southeast Asia’s deadly annual haze is back’, *The Diplomat*, 26 December 2019, online.

Author interviews, Manila, May and August 2019.

Author interviews, Manila, May and August 2019. It’s important to stress that the NCWC isn’t a military entity and acts purely as a coordinating body with no executive power or authority to initiate or control operations.

The US Defense Threat Reduction Center provided funding for the construction of the NCWC to the tune of US$50 million.

Author interview, Manila, May 2019.

SEAVISION is an unclassified web-based maritime situational awareness tool that allows users to view and share a broad array of data to inform and improve the execution of sea-based MARSEC operations. It can also be coupled to a threat detection platform that provides near real-time alerts on the positions of vessels of interest.
23 Combined Enterprises Regional Information Exchange System.
24 Author observations during the Southeast Asia Cooperation and Training (SEACAT) Exercise 2019, during which the NCWC acted as a secondary watch centre for Singapore’s Information Fusion Centre.
25 The National Intelligence Coordinating Agency also has a partial attachment to NCWC through its existence as an intelligence fusion centre—although it isn’t a formal supporting body.
26 The four non-PCG personnel attached to the NCWC are all from the PNP-MG.
27 Author interviews, Manila and Cebu, May 2019.
28 Author interviews, Manila, August 2019.
29 MECC’s founding legislation is contained in the Act on Safeguarding Thailand’s Maritime Interests.
30 A major trigger for transforming MECC from a coordination centre to a command body was the July 2018 sinking of a Thai tourist boat off the coast of Phuket. At the time of the accident, the vessel was carrying 101 passengers, most of whom were Chinese. The incident left 44 people dead and sparked a major diplomatic row between Bangkok and Beijing.
31 Author interviews, Bangkok, June 2019.
32 Author interviews, Bangkok, June 2019.
33 It should be noted that, at the time of writing, the MECC has had only 30% of its statutory authority promulgated. Until a complete legal framework is finalised, the centre will use existing regulations already enacted for the older (coordinating) entity to manage and respond to maritime incidents.
34 Author interviews, Bangkok, June 2019. The MECC is currently operating on a start-up budget of $89 million and will receive a further $1.404 million by the end of 2019.
35 Author interviews, Bangkok, June 2019.
36 Author interviews, Bangkok, June 2019.
37 Author interviews, Bangkok, June 2019.
38 BAKORKAMLA was set up in 2005 primarily as an information clearing house for the various Indonesian agencies that have a MARSEC remit.
39 The global maritime fulcrum construct is essentially aimed at recasting Indonesia’s expansive maritime space as an asset rather than a liability and is designed to address the myriad threats that have become part and parcel of the unstable and uncertain littoral environment in the Asia-Pacific. Remarks made during the Maritime Defense in the Littoral Environment Seminar, Jakarta, Indonesia, 30 October – 1 November 2017.
41 Morris & Paoli, A preliminary assessment of Indonesia’s maritime security threats and capabilities, 34.
43 Arif, ‘Power plays in Indonesian waters’.
44 There are plans to construct an additional seven maritime zones in north Sumatra, west Sumatra, Cilacap, Makassar, Balikpapam, Natuna, Sorong and Merauke.
45 Presidential Decree no. 174/2014, online.
46 Morris & Paoli, A preliminary assessment of Indonesia’s maritime security threats and capabilities, 34; Arif, ‘Power plays in Indonesian waters’.
47 Parameswaran, Indonesia’s maritime ambition: can Jokowi realise it?.
49 Morris & Paoli, A preliminary assessment of Indonesia’s maritime security threats and capabilities, 25.
50 Interviews, Manila, May and August 2019.
51 Arif, ‘Power plays in Indonesian waters’; Parameswaran, ‘Confronting Indonesia’s maritime coordination challenge’.
52 In April 2015, the EU placed a ‘yellow card’ on Thailand, warning the country that it wasn’t doing enough to tackle illegal fishing in its national waters. The designation was lifted in November 2019 following a concerted push by Bangkok to institute a comprehensive effort to curtail the operations of renegade trawlers. Had the problem persisted, it could have led to the issuance of a ‘red card’, which would have meant a complete ban on all imports of Thai fisheries products into the EU.
53 Interviews, Bangkok, June 2019.
54 Interviews, Manila August 2019.
55 Interviews, Manila, August 2019.
56 Author observations and interviews: Jakarta, March 2017; Manila, May and August 2019; and Bangkok, June 2019.
57 Peter Chalk, The maritime dimension of international security: terrorism. piracy and challenges for the United States, RAND Corporation, Santa Monica, 2008, fn 17, 12.
58 Typically, the desire to obtain these prestige assets is merely a function of the fact that neighbouring states possess them. Moreover, in many cases they simply end up being white elephants, largely because the knowledge of how to maintain and sustain the platforms is lacking.
60 Parameswaran, Indonesia’s maritime ambition: can Jokowi realise it?.
61 Parameswaran, Indonesia’s maritime ambition: can Jokowi realise it?.
The PCG has set itself a goal of expanding its manpower to 30,000 by 2023. Given that the agency constitutes the backbone of the NCWC, at least some of those personnel will no doubt be assigned to the centre. At the time of writing, however, the exact number has yet to be announced.

The Institute for Security Governance was launched in 2019 as a successor to the Center for Civil Military relations at the Monterey Naval Postgraduate School in California. It’s a Defense Security Cooperation Agency tenant activity that advances US MARSEC interests through education programs that are designed to enhance partner nations’ capabilities for addressing shared security challenges. For further information, see ‘Institute for Security Governance (ISG)’, Naval Postgraduate School, online.

The Maritime Security Initiative was announced at the March 2016 session of the US–Philippines Bilateral Security Dialogue and is aimed at promoting regional MDA, expanding offshore exercises and leveraging senior-level engagements. The program is funded to US$425 million. See Prashanth Parameswaran, ‘America’s new maritime security initiative for Southeast Asia’, The Diplomat, 24 February 2018; Coyne, Mice that roar: patrol and coastal combatants in Southeast Asia, 30.

One of Duterte’s main pledges on his election trail was to initiate an unprecedented and aggressive response to the Philippines’ growing drug crisis. Not only did he promise that 100,000 dealers, traffickers and addicts would be eliminated during his tenure, but he also offered bonuses to the police for every ‘criminal’ body that they delivered and vowed to shield from prosecution any individual who was willing to prevent the country from degenerating into a narco-state. Thousands have subsequently been killed as a result of his crackdown, with some estimates running to as high as 20,000 fatalities. For more on the Philippines’ war on drugs, see Peter Chalk, National security in the Philippines under Duterte: shooting from the hip or pragmatic partnerships beyond the noise?, ASPI, Canberra, 2018, 8–9, online.

Although a nominally civilian government was returned in 2019, the army continues to hold considerable sway in Thailand and it isn’t yet apparent that the political environment of the country has changed markedly, if at all, from the one that emerged after the military coup in 2014.

In May 2019, for instance, widespread riots broke out in the Indonesian capital after Prabowo Subianto lost the presidential election to Joko Widodo. The former special forces general had aligned himself with hardline Muslim movements during the campaign and following his defeat he exhorted those groups to mobilise ‘people’s power’ for days of street protests. Two years earlier, Jakarta’s Christian mayor, Basuki Tjahaja Purnama (‘Ahok’), was handed a controversial two-year prison sentence for blasphemy in what was widely seen as a direct blow to religious tolerance and as the effective abrogation of the country’s judiciary by Islamist mob rule.

These threats are all delineated in the Australian Government’s Guide to Australian maritime security arrangements (known as ‘GAMSA’), online.

The coastline of mainland Australia runs to nearly 36,000 kilometres. The country’s exclusive economic zone extends to 200 nautical miles from the territorial sea baseline, encompassing over 10 million square kilometres of ocean space once all of the nation’s offshore sovereign possessions are factored in. See Department of Home Affairs (DHA), Future maritime surveillance capability, Australian Government, 14 February 2019, online.

The vessels were gifted under the Pacific Patrol Boat Program, which was the forerunner to the Pacific Maritime Security Program.


Michael Arnold, ‘Patrol boats set to upgrade capabilities’, The PNG Post Courier, 5 February 2019, online.


DHA, Future maritime surveillance capability.

Coyne, Mice that roar: patrol and coastal combatants in ASEAN, 34.

Author interview, Manila, August 2019.
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<td>armed maritime crime</td>
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