

ENHANCING ASEAN MARITIME COOPERATION: PEACE, STABILITY AND BALANCING INTERESTS

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INTRODUCTION

Global supplies and trade routes rely heavily on the maritime domain. In particular, it is estimated that 40 per cent of global maritime supplies come across the South China Sea. Of course, 'Southeast Asia is a porous, fragmented geographic region of enormous variety and fluidity, consisting of both mainland and maritime component'¹ and is one of the busiest supply routes amongst the other global maritime supply lines.

South-East Asia connects two oceans, the Pacific and the Indian oceans. It is essentially important to keep this sea line of communication with the freedom of navigation and overflight. However, it is also important to note that the idea of security in this region is quite complex. There have been a number of issues already in place such as territorial disputes, maritime claims, sea robbery and other conventional maritime problems. The emergence of transnational crimes, terrorism, military modernisation and a potential arms race in the region is also reviving security concerns for powers in the region.

Since the formation of Association of South East Asia Nations (ASEAN), a number of initiatives and mechanisms have been implemented to promote regional peace, prosperity, stability and security. ASEAN also embraces its security and economic dialogue partners to address these issues. To date, the complexity of the tasks for ASEAN countries appears to be—how can South-East Asian nations (ASEAN) overcome regional maritime challenges to maintain peace and stability while balancing their individual economic and security interests?

This complex task informs the research focus of this study:

How can ASEAN states like Cambodia support the maintenance of peace and stability in the region whilst also prioritising their own economic and security interests?

¹Emrys Chew, 'Southeast Asia and the Maritime Balance of Power', in Sam Bateman and Joshua Ho (eds), *Southeast Asia and the Rise of Chinese and Indian Naval Power*, Routledge, 2010 p 56.

Thus, in order to tackle the above mentioned issues, this paper will first discuss the impact of ASEAN economies on regional security. Second, the paper examines Cambodian maritime priorities and approaches. Third, this paper will seek lessons learnt from the ASEAN model to assess ASEAN strengths and weaknesses in the maritime cooperation domain. The study concludes with policy recommendations related to potential future engagement avenues with ASEAN's internal and external security partners to keep the region prosperous and peaceful.

CHAPTER 1: ASEAN ECONOMIES AND REGIONAL SECURITY

The South-East Asian region comprises of many developing countries and one way to transition from poverty is to integrate ASEAN economies into the global market. While governments need to support economic growth to maintain the development of education, health, and environmental systems, their safety and security remain vulnerable.

Many scholars have indicated that 'the connection of what happens *from* sea influence or benefit what happens on land'. The global supply demands continue to grow largely, it is extremely important to maintain the flow of supply line. The ability to access and control of the sea is believed to be important; however, it may no longer rely heavily on, in military context, where we should have a large fleet of naval vessels to take control over an area; yet, the ability to rely on security partners. For instance, regional peace and stability would enhance maritime cooperation and trades for regional and global economy and prosperity.

Regional security can help boost ASEAN prosperity. While the ability to conduct operations and collaboration of a country is important, a nation's budget is largely derived from gross domestic product (GDP) which comes from goods and service taxes. The economic downturn would have huge impact on the expenditure or even force to have defence cut back. Some practical exercises had been shutdown due to economic downturn in 2008 global economic crisis. Similarly, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the closure of ports, businesses and both military and civilian training was called off. These contributing factors have significant impacts on regional and global maritime strategy and maritime policy.

ASEAN Economic Development

Generally, ASEAN was formed for an economic development purpose. Geographically, the South-East Asia region sits in a major shipping lane connecting the Pacific Ocean and the Indian Ocean. The region's ports itself accommodate a massive volume of the world supplies including oil and gas, cargo containers, manufacturing products and fish stock. The regional

economy relies on two major drivers, the intra-regional economy tie and the interconnected with China, the US, Australian and the EU economy. 'It was estimated that 80% of global trade by volume and 70% by value is transported by sea. Of this, 60% of maritime trade passes through Asia, with the South China Sea (SCS) carrying an estimated one-third of global shipping.²

The top intra-regional trading partners are Singapore, Indonesia, and Malaysia. A recent data of ASEAN intra- regional trade 2021, however, is relatively low with the estimation of USD 23 billion, only 5 per cent of its total trade taking place within the potential region which was estimated to be worth at least USD 67 billion, accounts for 25 per cent of the overall intra-regional trades. The reason for low level of intraregional trade in South-East Asia region may include the economic downturn during the COVID-19 pandemic era that slowed down the economy and the post-COVID, most of the regional countries are slowly progressing.

ASEAN External Ties: China and the US

China and the US are extremely important for ASEAN economy and security. Choosing the US or/and China is not the matter of choice but the flow of international engagement. Despite the rise of China's economy and military, ASEAN is in a difficult situation where they are afraid of China using coercive approach to suppress AMS to surrender their claims because China is one of the largest economic partners to ASEAN member state. Recently, the ASEAN Secretariat report in June 2023 shows that 'China is the largest bilateral trading partner, accounting for a total trade value of USD 722.2 billion, equivalent to 18.8 per cent of ASEAN's overall trade.³ The US and EU account for 10.9 per cent and 7.7 per cent. However, the inflow amount of foreign direct investment (FDI) in 2022 into ASEAN accounted for USD 224.2 billion with the 5.5 per cent growth from year 2021. The US remains the top lead in FDI and is followed by Japan and EU. This data has shown that the economic between ASEAN and external partners such as China, the US and many others remain significantly important and are interconnected.

China has become crucial to countries around the world, especially, in this region. While a slightly decreasing volume of investment from the US on Brunei economy in 2020 and 2021, China become the first trading partner with Brunei accounting for USD 2.8 billion, about 14 per

² 'How Much Trade Transits the South China Sea?', China Power, 2 August 2018, updated 25 January 2021. chinapower.csis.org/much-trade-transits-south-china-sea/

³ Association of Southeast Asian Nations, 'Economic Outlook', *ASEAN Economic Integration Brief*, July 13 2023, 13:3–4, p 4. doi.org/https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/07/AEIB_No.13_July2023_final.pdf

cent of the 'sultan's total trade that year.⁴ Similarly, China's investment in Indonesia has been relatively enormous. The amount of trade in goods between the US and Indonesia accounted for USD 37.1 billion in 2021, yet, China–Indonesia was at USD 110 billion in the same year, which was about 26 per cent of their total trade. Unsurprisingly, despite having disagreement with China over maritime territory, the Philippines large amount of agriculture products, accounting for 30 per cent, are exporting to China.

This indication has shown that ASEAN countries have relied on the economic interdependency with each other. Direct investment from China is perhaps a key milestone for regional country to pursuit its fortune and prosperity since China is one of the largest consumers and the second largest world economy. However, 'Excessive dependence on China may increase countries' vulnerability to so called China economic coercion pressure.'⁵ It is believed China is using soft power strategy to influence small and developing countries to fall into their traps through their economy and trades influence.

The interdependence of ASEAN economies and external partners should be carefully monitored. Meanwhile ASEAN–China economic relations have significantly increased over the past decade, political factors between ASEAN member states and China would perhaps be the root cause of economy coercion. For example, the confrontation between China and the Philippines authority over the Chinese fishing fleet in the West Philippine Sea brought about Beijing's decision to prevent the Philippine banana containers from entering China's market with the excuse of that products contained bugs. The incident caused Manila's economy to lose millions of dollars and it seems to be a clear indication from Beijing that should Manila confront them again, they would put pressure on their economy. Such provocative acts should be monitored and ASEAN member countries and China should be extra careful on how they use their means to provoke each other.

Despite political disagreement between Cambodia and the US, the US remains the largest import and export partner for Cambodia. '[T]he primary US economic weakness in Cambodia is investment—not trade.'⁶ Cambodia's trade with both the United States and China has grown significantly. China remains Cambodia's largest trading partner, whereas the

⁴ Gregory B Poling and Andreyka Natalegawa, 'Assessing U.S. and Chinese Influence in Southeast Asia', Centre for Strategic and International Studies, 7 August 2023. https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/2023-08/230807_Poling_Influence_SoutheastAsia.pdf?VersionId=eJgGM04iKBt0YI9fWu.co9bdSNj44rFc

⁵ Bonnie S Glaser, 'China's Coercive Economic Diplomacy: A New and Worrying Trend', Center for Strategic and International Studies, 6 August 2012. csis.org/analysis/chinas-coercive-economic-diplomacy-new-and-worrying-trend

⁶ Gregory B Poling and Andreyka Natalegawa, 'Assessing U.S. and Chinese Influence in Southeast Asia'.

United States has always been important to Cambodia's trading partner. Cambodia's trade in goods with the United States was \$7.8 billion, accounted for 17 per cent of its total trade in 2021, which was a significantly increase from \$4.7 billion in 2019 and \$5.6 billion in 2020. China, on the other hand, is the largest trading partner, with a total trade accounted for \$11.2 billion in 2021, or approximately 24 per cent of Cambodia's total trade. This was increasing from \$8.6 billion in 2019 and \$8.2 billion in 2020.

Cambodian major exports are manufacturing and agricultural product such as garment, rice, rubber and casava. However, fishing industry remain under prohibition from the EU due to European Union certain regulations.

ASEAN Maritime Security Issues

Despite the rise of China economy and the significance increase in China military presence and expenditure, it is important to keep the US focus and presence in the region. By overtaking the US and becoming the largest world economy, China has posed significant concern to middle power and small power states in East China Sea and South-East Asia regions. The small and developing maritime claimant states in South-East Asia, such as Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia and Brunei, remain vulnerable for Chinese military coercion in the SCS. Middle-power states—namely, Australia, Republic of Korea and Japan—may have also been directly and indirectly impacted from China maritime power and maritime economy. The idea is to keep the US military presence in the SCS; and at least, if not the case, would make China reconsider their actions toward regional countries in the SCS.

Potential of the conflict may be caused by individual maritime economic interest and historical claims. Ambiguity definition of the United Nation Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) endorses claimant states to assert their maritime claim base on different reasons. While the world population has significantly increased over time, global supply demands are also skyrocketing too. Oil and gas are main resources for energy even though environmental energy such as offshore wind solar and other form of energy have been introduced. It has been believed, too, that the underwater natural oil and gas is estimated to be more than oil existed in the Middle East. Perhaps a reason for all claimants relentlessly fighting for that wealth. Similarly, Spratly and Paracel Islands is one of the strategic locations to turn into military installation in time of war. Like the US territory Guam, the Paracel and Spratly Islands can be the strategic area to monitor any military vessels maneuvering around the region.

Moreover, deconfliction on resources exploitation in the SCS and around the Spratly and

Paracel Islands may trigger the military tension between China and AMS and have dragged the US involvement to the conflict over the economic and political interests in the SCS affairs. While the Philippines commissioned Amoco company to drill for oil in the 1970s and 1980s in Reed Bank, in 1990s they also pulled the US company to drill for oil and should be when the US shifted their interest into the region. In 1992, China also started exploit for natural oil and gas while the Viet Nam government allowed VietSov Petro to drill for oil; yet, later on China blockaded the VietSov Petro from delivering food and supply to the rig and triggered the tension between the two governments.

Regional maritime trades and security remain vulnerable to existing traditional maritime issues. Sea robberies, piracy and violence against merchant ships at sea continue to pose dramatic concern for government and seafarers who operate at sea. There has been an increasing number of incidents occurring around this region in the first quarter of 2023 compared to the same period in the last two years. Data from ReCAAP ISC (Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery) showed that there were 25 actual incidents and zero attempt against vessels. The incidents were reported to be 3 in Indonesian water, 2 in the Philippines, 19 in the Strait of Malacca and Singapore.

The data has indicated that the major concern area remain in the Strait of Malacca and Singapore the major routes for merchant and cargo ships. However, the reported incidents also shows that there is no severe case happened, and there were armed robbery and petty theft against ships. The abduction of crew for ransom from extremist group, Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG) remain the challenge for regional and local authority since organised syndicate remains in the area. Piracy, on the other hand, has decreased significantly since the incident only happens at high sea.

CHAPTER 2: CAMBODIAN MARITIME INTERESTS

Cambodia is one of the ASEAN regional countries located in the Gulf of Thailand along with Thailand, Vietnam and Malaysia. Cambodia has land borders to Thailand, Laos and Vietnam and has 440 kilometres of coastline laying across 4 provinces, Koh Kong, Prash Sihanouk, Keb and Kampot province. People living along the coastal area are estimated to be around 1 million and numbers are rising. The people rely on marine natural resources, tourism and port and shipping for their livelihood. Thus, the Royal Government of the Kingdom of Cambodia (RGC) has identified maritime sector is one amongst others to Cambodia economy. Aside from marine energy exploitation, which was closed down due to certain reasons,

Cambodia economy has been benefited from fishing industry, tourism and shipping and port sectors, estimated account for USD 2.8 billion at gross value added in 2020.⁷

The maritime sector is essential for Cambodian economic development; therefore, the RGC has identified several key priorities namely, shipping and port, fisheries, tourism and environmental protection. These priorities have clearly set out RGC's development plan of enhancing and developing port infrastructure and security, enhancing marine resource productions, promote coastal tourism and protection of coastal environment.

Sihanoukville Autonomous Port (SAP) is the largest Cambodian international port and has played significant role for the country economy in term of importing and exporting all products. The seventh RGC has also brought about infrastructure development scheme which included road and port development in their plan. More than

5 million tons of cargo containers had been accommodated in 2018 and it is estimated approximately 2 million tons of containerised cargo pass thorough SAP every year.

Besides shipping and port industry, the fishery sector has provided great value of both nutrition and income to Cambodian people especially people living along the coastal provinces. Fishing industry, both fresh-water and seawater, has brought about part-time, full-time and even seasonal jobs for Cambodians. Moreover, it was estimated about 80 per cent of the nutrition facts at the national level come from marine resources. Marine catch is estimated to be around 121,025 tons to 125,000 tons, approximately 8 to 10 per cent of the country's gross domestic product (GDP) in the year 2021.

Therefore, it is clear that maritime passage is significantly important and any disruption such as the SCS issue, armed robbery, overfishing and other illegal activities at sea will have enormous impact on the Cambodian economy. Hence, 'Cambodia must protect its maritime sovereignty and security, especially the protection of strategic economic routes and natural resources.'⁸

At the domestic level, the RCG has established a multi-agency organisation, the National Committee for Maritime Security (NCMS) to carry out national strategy and policy to protect sovereignty, safeguard maritime interests, prevention and deterrence of illegal maritime activities with collective unity of effort from Cambodian maritime authority agencies working in

⁷ Kongchheng Poch and Sothea Oum, 'Sustainable Blue Economy Development in Cambodia: Status, Challenges, and Priorities', Economic Research Institute for ASEAN and East Asia, 2023-06, August 2023. eria.org/uploads/media/policy-brief/FY2023/Sustainable-Blue-Economy-Development-in-Cambodia.pdf.

⁸ Cambodia Defence Policy 2022, pp 24

the maritime sphere. NCMS is a national mechanism consisting of a wide range of agencies working on maritime environment, such as the military, police, fisheries administration, custom, port authority and many other. The committee roles and responsibilities are to ensure the activities at sea are being monitored and regulated in accordance with the national and international law of the sea; preventing and deterring all kind of illegal activities such as IUU fishing, smuggling of goods, contraband, weapons and especially human trafficking.

Bilateral engagement between Cambodia and neighboring countries have dramatically increased over the years. The exchange visit between NCMS Tactical Command headquarter with Thai Naval area command 1 have been scheduled annually focusing on information exchange, updating course of action in combating IUU fishing in the vicinity of overlapping maritime area, enhancing human relation and confident building measure between the two countries. Meanwhile, there have also been exchange visits between Thai navy delegation to Command HQ level as well such as exchange visit of both delegation to each other command headquarters. Recently, the Royal Cambodian Navy (RCN) and Royal Thai Navy have also leveraged higher cooperation by initiated navy to navy talks. The idea is to enhance level of information sharing, discussing annual bilateral engagement and other related maritime issues. However, this initiative is under higher authority consideration.

Cambodia and Vietnam, on the other hand, have constantly continued exchange visits every year and continued to exchange information especially on IUU fishing. There have been a lot of cases of Vietnamese fishing vessels breach out and fishing on Cambodian maritime area. Once they were seized and most of the time they were educated then send back to Vietnamese authority. It seems to be that unclear maritime border encourages fishermen to continue breaking the law of both countries. Moreover, an anecdote story said that the Cambodian fishery sector has been impacted by the fact that Vietnamese fishing vessels have transferred marine catch to mothership and they continue to fishing further for better catch.

At subregional level, NCMS has been working closely with neighboring country agencies such as the Thai maritime enforcement coordination center (Thai-MECC), Viet Nam coastguard (VCG), Malaysian maritime enforcement agency (MMEA). In the Gulf of Thailand in 2012, with the commitment of combating IUU activities, the Gulf of Thailand initiative (GoTi) was established with heavily support by the US aim to confront maritime challenges such as illegal fishing, transboundary organised crime, contraband, environmental degradation, information sharing for maritime domain awareness and miscalculation between forces against forces, forces against fishermen and people operate at sea. The GoTi has been later

expanded to Southeast Asia Maritime Law Enforcement Cooperation (SEMLEC) which includes Indonesia and the Philippines into subregion.

The expansion itself has allowed more ASEAN member states that are interested in the initiative to engage with each other sharing information, raising maritime activities concern and especially sharing knowledge and experiences on tackling issues at sea. The initiative has also promoted best practices and shared among agency for further possible solutions. Maritime share awareness during the events has enlighten better maritime picture on maritime domain to expect challenges that they might face once they are operating at sea. The workshop also brings about capacity building, confidence building and trust to the table.

At ASEAN regional level, RGC (RCN and NCMS) has actively engaged with AMS activities such as ASEAN Navy Chief Meeting (ANCM), ADMM and ADMM related meeting and activities, Sea Power Conference, WPNS, Shangri-La dialogue and many others. The proactive approach is to express the commitment of the RGC to enhance regional and global security, promoting peace and stability, enhancing confidence building measures and promote trust amongst each other. ANCM is a venue for naval commanders to exchange their view, a discussion platform to initiate new action from ASEAN navy. Recently, ANCM has adopted a Guideline for Maritime Interaction (GMI); the aim is for ASEAN member to minimise risk of miscalculation at sea by adopting Code of Unplanned Encountered at Sea (CUES) to be used to prevent any incident that may escalate the situation at sea. The establishment of Information Fusion Center in Changi, Singapore is also a hub for ASEAN navy member to share information on maritime domain as well.

Geopolitically, the rise of China economy and enormous expansion of the People's Liberation Army Navy (PLAN) raise significant concern their military activities in the SCS and especially for AMS claimant states such as the Philippines, Viet Nam, Indonesia, Malaysia and Brunei. The proliferation in defence expenditure of countries party to SCS dispute have raised significant concern for regional security. Taiwan Strait and Korean Peninsula also pose significant threat to global security. Through ADMM, ADMM-plus and other regional mechanisms, RGC as well as RCAF encourage all parties involved to settle dispute peacefully and that could be done through diplomatic and defence dialogue. Joint combined exercises such as ADMM-plus are also a platform to mitigate risk of misuse, miscalculation at sea too. The exercise not only provides real practical cooperation, but also brought about confidence building measures, trust, transparency and commitment to the field.

CHAPTER 3: LESSON LEARNT AND CHALLENGES AHEAD

In terms of lessons learnt, it is clear that the economy of developing countries such as Cambodia in South-East Asia are most likely to remain dependent on regional economic integration. Therefore, any incident which happens at sea will impact supply demands, the flows and movements of goods and ultimately severely impact national economies. China's economic boom should be viewed as an opportunity rather than a threat since China has been one of the top regional economic partners.

However, the rise of China's economy has also led to enormous defence expenditure and posed significant concern to countries and parties to SCS disputes. The increase number of regional militaries modernisation plans and defence reforms may trigger a potential arms race in the region which could potentially escalate the SCS and the Taiwan Strait situation.

Traditional maritime issues such as border issues, IUU fishing, environmental degradation, sea robbery and piracy, and existing extremist group activity remain challenges for regional security. IUU fishing has impacted severely some economies such as Indonesia, and the Philippines.

Relentless effort combatting those crimes such as the GoTi, ANCM, ADMM, ADMM-Plus and related meetings are great venue for various agencies from different country to share their concern, challenges and together finding practical solution to tackle those problems. It has been shown that through cooperation the number of crimes committed have been dramatically decreased throughout the years. In GoT, we have seen a number of IUU fishing crimes have dropped heavily. It may perhaps the outcome of effective cooperation between countries, the information sharing of the Vessel Monitoring System (VMS) and Electronic Reporting System and Electronic Monitoring, and the fishermen have gone further at sea.

Multilateral engagement such as ASEAN Multilateral Naval Exercise (AMNEX), ADMM-Plus EWG on MS exercise, ASEAN-China, ASEAN-Australia and so on are the great venues for ASEAN members as well as other security partners to enhance cooperation, promoting peace, security and stability, promote confidence building measures, and enhance trust and transparency. The Sea Power Conference, WPNS, Shangri-La dialogue etc. are high dialogue venues for senior official to discuss political as well as strategy concerns and seek further possible solutions for tactical and operational tasks.

ASEAN Challenges Ahead

Although cooperation broadly at certain levels seems to be effective, there are large

gaps that remain ripe for exploitation:

1. **Capability:** there has been a huge capability gap between ASEAN countries for quite some time. States with the most advanced technology capability include Singapore, Malaysia and Thailand. But Cambodia is far behind those countries. These technologies have created distances between the navy capabilities of ASEAN states in terms of participating in joint exercise and join operation.
2. **Capacity:** only countries like Thailand, Indonesia, and Vietnam have dominantly large numbers of fleets and navy personnel in the region.
3. **Budget:** the budget allocation for enhancing capability is often shifted downwards for other priorities. The outcome of budget constraints has left naval capability underdeveloped. Therefore, the ability to deliver effective outcomes of navies in the region remains vulnerable.
4. **Information Sharing:** the information sharing amongst agencies and security partners remains questionable due to certain security restrictions stopping free flow of information.
5. **Trust:** trust and confidence amongst partners remains questionable due to the misalignment of political wills and operations on the field. It is often said that everyone wants a peaceful and stable region, yet, military actions seem to be proving different. For example, the agreement for withdrawing from dispute area from the Philippines and China – and yet Chinese fishing vessels are still to be at the vicinity of the dispute area.

Future Engagement

In order to fulfill the gaps identified, as an ASEAN country, Cambodia could consider the following concluding policy recommendations:

1. Amongst ASEAN states:
 - instead of establishing new initiatives, Cambodia could use existing mechanisms (namely GoTi) to expand and include more regional partners or extra-regional partners such as Australia, Japan, Korea, and China in this initiative
 - set up clear plans and visions of the maritime ASEAN region
 - enhance capability and interoperability by increasing field training, desktop exercises and exchange programs.
2. With external partners:
 - establish bilateral and multilateral platforms that can exchange information (e.g., IFC) effectively

- enhance bilateral maritime cooperation such as joint exercises, multilateral exercises in the South-
- East Asian sphere
- promote capacity building such as technology transferring with advanced nations
- promote a military educational system akin to partners in the region.

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BIOGRAPHY

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