BUILDING A COMPREHENSIVE AUSTRALIA-ASEAN MARITIME PARTNERSHIP IN A CHANGING INDO-PACIFIC ORDER

Salim
Head of Indonesia Maritime Studies Centre;
Doctoral Candidate, Universitas Airlangga;
Lecturer, Naval Defense Management Program, Naval Polytechnic
salim.lead790@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

The Australia-ASEAN maritime partnership faces both practical opportunities and strategic tensions. This paper analyzes maritime security cooperation following the 2024 ASEAN-Australia Special Summit, using a 'role conflict' framework to assess how Australia balances its 'middle power' support for ASEAN multilateralism with its 'minilateral ally' posture (AUKUS, Quad). From an ASEAN-centric, Indonesian naval practitioner's perspective, it examines three pillars: (1) the Blue Economy foundation; (2) the security spectrum from Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing to naval interoperability; and (3) the institutional challenge AUKUS poses to ASEAN Centrality. This 'role conflict' framework explains Australia's strategic behaviour as an attempt to use 'middle power' engagement to mitigate the diplomatic friction caused by its 'minilateral ally' posture. The paper argues Australia's strategy to manage this 'role conflict' (using 'middle power' funding to offset 'minilateral ally' friction) is viable but tenuous. Partnership resilience will be determined not by high-end naval ('grey-hull') cooperation, fractured by AUKUS, but by foundational trust built through civilian law enforcement ('white-hull') and scientific ('blue') channels. While AUKUS creates friction, new initiatives like the AUD $64 million Southeast Asia Maritime Partnerships Initiative offer crucial confidence-building pathways. The paper concludes with policy recommendations focused on 'white-hull' over 'grey-hull' cooperation, including tailored capacity-building and a formal Track 1.5 dialogue, to ensure the partnership strengthens, not undermines, the ASEAN-led regional architecture.

Keywords: Maritime Security, Australia-ASEAN, ASEAN Centrality, AUKUS, Indo-Pacific, Middle Power

1. INTRODUCTION: A RENEWED PARTNERSHIP AT A STRATEGIC CROSSROADS

The 2024 ASEAN-Australia Special Summit in Melbourne was a significant milestone, celebrating 50 years of partnership (Australian Embassy Jakarta, 2024a; Wong, 2024a). This summit built on the Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (CSP) established in 2021 (ASEAN, 2023). It resulted in the Melbourne Declaration, which reaffirmed a commitment to 'maintaining and promoting peace, security and stability in the region' (ASEAN, 2024a).

This summit, however, occurred amidst a profound paradigm shift in Australia's strategic posture, as articulated in its 2023 Defence Strategic Review (DSR) (Australian Department of Defence, 2023). The DSR articulates a new strategic posture focused on 'National Defence' (Australian Department of Defence, 2023). This 'National Defence' strategy shifts Australia's focus to its 'northern approaches,' an area that functionally encompasses the ASEAN maritime domain (Australian Department of Defence, 2023).

This creates a central paradox for ASEAN. On one hand, Australia is increasing its practical engagement. The 2024 Summit yielded tangible commitments, notably the new AUD $64 million Southeast Asia Maritime Partnerships Initiative (including A$40 million in new funding) (hereafter 'the Maritime Initiative') (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024; Wong, 2024a). On the other hand, the DSR's new strategic posture relies on exclusive, US-led minilateral alliances, specifically the AUKUS trilateral pact (Australia, UK, US) (Li, 2022) and the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad).

From an ASEAN-centric perspective, particularly from Indonesia, this paradox raises well-documented concerns. Analysts in Indonesia and Malaysia warned that AUKUS could trigger a regional arms race and challenge non-

proliferation norms under the Southeast Asia Nuclear Weapon-Free Zone (SEANWFZ) Treaty. While some analysts assessed these fears as 'overblown' (Choong & Storey, 2021), regional concerns remained. The most critical concern is that such minilateralism fundamentally challenges the core principle of ASEAN Centrality (Li, 2022).

The Australia-ASEAN relationship is thus bifurcated into dual tracks. The first is a deepening, well-funded "soft" cooperation (e.g., environment, marine science) within the ASEAN framework. The second is a parallel track of "hard" security cooperation (e.g., nuclear-powered attack submarines) conducted outside ASEAN, yet designed to operate within ASEAN's geography. The 2024 Summit and its funding represent a deliberate Australian effort to manage the diplomatic fallout from this bifurcation.

Adopting the perspective of an Indonesian naval practitioner, this paper analyzes the future of Australia-ASEAN maritime security cooperation. It poses three research questions. First (RQ1), how will Australia manage the perceived 'role conflict' between its middle power diplomacy and its exclusive minilateral alliance commitments? Second (RQ2), what are the most resilient practical cooperation pathways that can insulate the partnership from wider great power competition? These include combating Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing and enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA), defined as the effective understanding of activities in the maritime environment that could impact security, safety, or economic interests. Third (RQ3), from an Indonesian operational perspective, what mechanisms can ensure this cooperation strengthens rather than undermines ASEAN Centrality?

This paper first outlines the 'role conflict' analytical framework (RQ1). It then analyzes three empirical dimensions of cooperation: (1) the economic and environmental foundations (RQ2), (2) the full security spectrum (RQ2), and (3) the institutional architecture (RQ3). Finally, it concludes with actionable policy recommendations.

2. ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK: AUSTRALIA'S 'ROLE CONFLICT' AS 'MIDDLE POWER' AND 'MINILATERAL ALLY'

Understanding the Australia-ASEAN partnership's complexity requires a 'role conflict' framework, which this analysis adopts instead of the 'dual pathways' framework (used for China-ASEAN). Australia's strategic posture reflects a tension between two increasingly contradictory foreign policy identities: the traditional 'middle power' and the emergent 'minilateral ally.'

The first identity is Australia as a 'middle power'. Middle power theory defines states like Australia as those that rely on maintaining a "rules-based international order" for their security. This role necessitates specializing in coalition-building, normative diplomacy, and strengthening multilateral institutions (Cooper et al., 1993).

This role manifests in Australia's deep engagement with ASEAN-led mechanisms. Canberra actively participates in the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) (ASEAN, 2022), the East Asia Summit (EAS), and, crucially, the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting-Plus (ADMM-Plus). Co-chairing ADMM-Plus Experts' Working Groups (EWG), for example, on military medicine, is classic middle power behavior designed to build trust and shared norms within an inclusive framework.

The second identity is Australia as a 'minilateral ally'. Minilateralism responds to perceived paralysis in consensus-based multilateral institutions (Li, 2022). These arrangements are exclusive, often secretive, and focus on developing high-end military capabilities among a small group of like-minded states (Li, 2022).

This role is embodied in Australia's commitment to AUKUS and the Quad. The 2023 Defence Strategic Review (Australian Department of Defence, 2023) effectively binds Australia's national defense strategy to the success of these minilateral arrangements, particularly through acquiring nuclear-powered submarines and long-range strike capabilities under AUKUS (Li, 2022).

The friction point for ASEAN is clear. These two roles are now in direct conflict. Australia's middle power role strengthens ASEAN Centrality by operating within and through ASEAN-led institutions. Australia's minilateral ally role fundamentally challenges it (Li, 2022). This US-led minilateralism risks creating a complex, multi-layered regional-security architecture, which represents what Li (2022) identifies as a 'new... mode of strategic realignment'. In this scenario, ASEAN-led institutions could be marginalized, responsible only for soft issues, while hard security is negotiated in non-ASEAN forums (Li, 2022). This marginalizes ASEAN and fractures its internal consensus, creating sharp divisions between member states (like the Philippines) and those who prioritize regional stability (like Indonesia and Malaysia; Choong & Storey, 2021; Li, 2022).

Analytically, the 2024 Summit initiatives, especially the funding from the Maritime Initiative (Wong, 2024a), represent an act of diplomatic reassurance and an attempt by Australia to rebalance the narrative and assure ASEAN that its middle power role is still primary. This funding represents the diplomatic cost Australia must pay ASEAN to manage the strategic cost incurred by its AUKUS commitments. Future trust and cooperation will depend on ASEAN's perception of which role, inclusive partner or exclusive ally, ultimately dominates Australian policy.

This 'role conflict' is not unique to Australia. Other middle powers grapple with similar pressures, balancing multilateral norms against great power alliance imperatives. For Australia, the middle power role has been a tool for 'norm entrepreneurship' within ASEAN (Cooper et al., 1993), requiring investment in inclusive, consensus-based institutions.

The minilateral ally role, however, prioritizes efficiency over inclusivity. This rise of minilateralism seeks to create 'coalitions of the willing' to address high-end security threats (Li, 2022). Analysts argue this shift directly challenges the 'ASEAN Way,' potentially relegating

ASEAN to a secondary role (Li, 2022; Choong & Storey, 2021). The tension is thus between Australia's desire for legitimacy (middle power role) and its demand for capability (minilateral role).

This 'role conflict' provides the lens to assess the partnership's future. The tension manifests differently across the domains of cooperation, starting with the 'safe track' of the economic and environmental foundation.

This framework, centered on the 'role conflict', dictates the structure of the following analysis. To manage the diplomatic friction from its 'minilateral ally' role (i.e., AUKUS), Australia must heavily invest in its 'middle power' role. This investment must be channeled into domains that are non-contentious, mutually beneficial, and build foundational trust. The economic and environmental sphere (the 'Blue' dimension) serves as this critical 'safe track'. The following section analyzes this foundational pillar, which acts as the diplomatic ballast for the entire partnership.

Table 1: Shifting Regional Security Architecture: ASEAN-centric vs. Minilateral

Feature	**ASEAN-centric Mechanisms (ADMM-Plus, ARF)**	**Minilateral Mechanisms (Quad, AUKUS)**
Principle	Inclusive, consensus-based (ASEAN, 2024a)	Exclusive, capability-based (Li, 2022; Tzinieris & Leoni, 2025)
Focus	Confidence-building, dialogue, norms (ASEAN, 2024a)	Balancing, deterrence, interoperability (Li, 2022)
Membership	Open to all regional powers (incl. China, Russia)	Restricted to like-minded US allies/partners (Tzinieris & Leoni, 2025)
ASEAN Perception	ASEAN as "Central" and "Driver" (ASEAN, 2024a)	ASEAN as "Supplementary" or "Marginal" (Li, 2022; Beeson, 2022)
AUS Engagement Example	Co-chairing ADMM-Plus EWGs (ASEAN, 2022)	Acquisition of nuclear-powered submarines (Li, 2022)

3. THE ECONOMIC AND ENVIRONMENTAL FOUNDATION FOR MARITIME PARTNERSHIP (THE "BLUE" DIMENSION)

This first pillar, the "Blue" dimension (referring to economic and environmental cooperation), analyzes the partnership's foundational economic and environmental foundation. Unlike the China-ASEAN relationship, dominated by terrestrial trade, the Australia-ASEAN relationship is rooted in securing sea resources and protecting trade routes.

Australia's and ASEAN's economic interests converge at sea. The 2023 DSR (Australian Department of Defence, 2023) states that "the defence of Australia's national interests lies in the protection of our economic connection with the world." As Australia is a continent reliant on maritime trade, the security of Sea Lines of Communication (SLOCs) transiting the Indonesian archipelago and the South China Sea is a vital core interest. This creates fundamental alignment with ASEAN states, which act as the gatekeepers of these critical waterways.

Beyond SLOC security, the key positive agenda is the Blue Economy. The 2024 Melbourne Declaration (ASEAN, 2024a) endorses cooperation on the Blue Economy, a key priority previously identified in the 'ASEAN Leaders' Declaration on the Blue Economy' (ASEAN, 2021b). It identifies the Blue Economy as a "powerful driver" for connectivity, innovation, and sustainable economic growth (ASEAN, 2024a). The official Maritime Cooperation Forum was complemented by a Track 2 Conference where maritime experts gathered to discuss issues including blue economy governance (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024). This reinforces the 'Blue' dimension as a practical and enduring pillar of the partnership.

From Indonesia's perspective, as the world's largest archipelagic state, the Blue Economy is fundamental to its national security and resource sovereignty (Bradford et al., 2023).

This highlights the significance of the Maritime Initiative (Wong, 2024a). Analysis shows the funding is directed

largely at civilian "white-hull" (coast guard) and "blue" (environmental) cooperation. The media release details partnerships with Australian civilian agencies (Wong, 2024a):

- Coral reef conservation via the Australian Institute for Marine Science.
- Maritime law enforcement (including IUU) via the Australian Border Force.
- Geospatial mapping via Geoscience Australia.
- Marine environmental governance via the Australian Centre for International Agricultural Research (ACIAR).
- Marine protection via the Department of Climate Change, Energy, the Environment and Water.

This deliberate funding of civilian and scientific cooperation serves a critical strategic function. It acts as diplomatic ballast. It creates a 'safe track' for progress, insulated from the unavoidable strategic friction of AUKUS. It also builds foundational institutional trust. For example, trust between scientists at Geoscience Australia and their Indonesian counterparts is a technical and political prerequisite for the more sensitive geospatial data-sharing required for future maritime domain awareness (MDA).

This 'blue' cooperation, while foundational, is primarily civilian-led. It provides the necessary ballast of trust for navigating the more contentious security domain, where national interests are not as clearly aligned. This analysis now turns to how Australia and ASEAN are attempting to leverage that foundational trust to manage the full spectrum of security threats, from constabulary 'white-hull' challenges to strategic 'grey-hull' friction.

4. ANALYZING THE SECURITY COOPERATION SPECTRUM: FROM "WHITE HULLS" TO "GREY HULLS"

The second pillar analyzes the full spectrum of security cooperation, moving from constabulary 'white-hull' (civilian law enforcement) challenges to strategic 'grey-hull' (naval) friction. It is divided into three domains: non-traditional, traditional, and emerging strategic challenges.

a. Practical Cooperation Against Non-Traditional Threats

This domain is ideal for productive Australia-ASEAN cooperation, focusing on shared threats where national interests align. The most prominent threat is IUU fishing. IUU is identified as a significant challenge by ASEAN bodies (ASEAN, 2023a; Dung & Son, 2023), and is a key topic for cooperation within the ARF Workplan on Maritime Security (ASEAN Regional Forum, 2022), and was named in the 2024 Melbourne Declaration (ASEAN, 2024a).

Australia brings expertise to this domain. The new Maritime Initiative includes "maritime law enforcement" (Wong, 2024a), understood to target IUU. From an Indonesian naval perspective, IUU is not a "soft" threat; it is a violation of sovereignty and theft of natural resources. The operational focus of the Indonesian Navy (Tentara Nasional Indonesia Angkatan Laut, TNI-AL) and Maritime Security Agency (Badan Keamanan Laut Republik Indonesia, BAKAMLA) on constabulary tasks means practical cooperation with the Australian Border Force (ABF) (Wong, 2024a) to combat IUU is a key operational priority.

From a BAKAMLA operational perspective, the primary challenge is asset scarcity over a vast archipelagic domain (Isjchwansyah, 2025).

Australian-supplied intelligence, such as satellite-derived electronic monitoring or fused data from the ABF, is not merely 'cooperation.' It is a critical 'force multiplier', consistent with the goals of partner-supplied maritime domain awareness support, such as that provided under the U.S. Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI) (Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2024). It allows Indonesian assets to shift from broad, costly patrols to targeted, intelligence-driven interdictions, maximizing the deterrent effect per-hull and per-flight-hour.

A growing non-traditional domain is maritime cybersecurity. Increased reliance on digital systems in ports and on vessels creates new vulnerabilities (Le Thu & Hogeveen, 2022). This is a growing concern, with partners exploring new

dialogues on maritime cybersecurity (Bradford et al., 2023).

b. Traditional Security Cooperation: Naval Exercises and Interoperability ("Grey Hull")

While "white hull" cooperation builds confidence, "grey hull" (naval) cooperation tests interoperability. Australia-ASEAN naval engagement is a two-tier system.

The first tier, multilateral engagement, functions as a high-visibility mechanism for confidence-building and norm-shaping. From an ASEAN perspective, multilateral engagements function as high-visibility mechanisms for confidence-building. Australia contributes to this architecture through exercises such as KAKADU. When hosted by Australia, this exercise provides a crucial venue for ASEAN navies to build shared understanding and baseline interoperability.

From an operational standpoint, the true value of exercises like KAKADU is not high-end warfighting integration, but rather procedural harmonization.

Real-world multilateral responses for Humanitarian Assistance and Disaster Relief (HADR) or Search and Rescue (SAR) often fail due to incompatible command-and-control (C2) protocols and communication failures, such as non-standard message formatting.

These exercises build the "muscle memory" for combined C2 and identify critical friction points (such as data-link incompatibilities or divergent replenishment-at-sea (RAS) procedures) that are invisible at the policy level.

A key multilateral mechanism is Indo-Pacific Endeavour (IPE), a regional engagement deployment focused on naval diplomacy, law of the sea workshops, and HADR exercises with ASEAN partners (Australian Department of Defence, 2024a).

The second tier, bilateral engagement, serves as the tactical laboratory for true technical interoperability. Prime examples include exercises between Australia and Indonesia, such as Exercise Keris Woomera (amphibious operations) (Australian Embassy Jakarta, 2024b) and

Exercise Rajawali Ausindo. Here, real warfighting capabilities are tested and developed, away from public observation. From an operational standpoint, these bilateral exercises, particularly amphibious drills like Keris Woomera (Australian Embassy Jakarta, 2024b), are the true test of interoperability. The 2024 iteration, for example, involved approximately 2,000 combined personnel and major assets (including HMAS Adelaide, KRI Makassar, fighter aircraft, and M1A1 Abrams tanks), demonstrating a significant, operationally-focused commitment (Australian Embassy Jakarta, 2024b; Australian Department of Defence, 2024b). From a practitioner standpoint, these 'friction points' are the primary barrier to effective joint operations, extending beyond simple hardware incompatibility to deep-seated doctrinal differences. While KAKADU builds C2 'muscle memory,' it also highlights significant gaps in digital interoperability, such as incompatible systems for Command, Control, Communications, Computers, Intelligence, Surveillance, Target Acquisition, and Reconnaissance (C4ISTAR), which are the integrated digital networks required to create a shared, real-time tactical picture. Gaps in these systems mean that assets from different navies cannot seamlessly share tactical data, severely limiting combined situational awareness. Differing data-link standards (e.g., Link 11 vs. Link 16) mean tactical data cannot be seamlessly shared, reducing combined situational awareness. Furthermore, procedural harmonization for tasks like RAS or anti-submarine warfare (ASW) requires common operating pictures and shared doctrine. These elements are perfected in minilateral groupings like AUKUS but remain aspirational in the broader ADMM-Plus context. These bilateral exercises move beyond diplomatic signalling to stress-test C2, logistics, and rules of engagement, which are the actual determinants of a successful joint operation.

c. The Strategic Challenge: AUKUS, Quad, and ASEAN Perceptions

This domain represents the core strategic challenge. While cooperation in 4.1 and 4.2 is positive, AUKUS threatens to undo that diplomatic progress. As outlined, many in ASEAN view AUKUS as

a direct challenge to the inclusive regional order (Li, 2022).

Indonesian and regional analysts have voiced significant concerns; (Choong & Storey, 2021) note the risk of triggering a regional 'arms race', challenging ASEAN's centrality (Li, 2022). This has led some analysts to argue AUKUS is a consequence of ASEAN's 'dithering' and highlights the urgent need for the bloc to 'find a way to make itself relevant again' in managing great power rivalry. At the ASEAN level, AUKUS is divisive. It exploits fault lines in ASEAN consensus between member states in direct dispute with China (like the Philippines), who may welcome US/Australian balancing, and those (like Indonesia and Malaysia) who prioritize stability (Choong & StoreY, 2021).

The core contradiction is that Australia's Defence Strategic Review (Australian Department of Defence, 2023) adopts a "strategy of denial" relying on AUKUS-derived capabilities (long-range strike and undersea warfare). The DSR defines the primary operational area for this strategy as "maritime Southeast Asia" (Australian Department of Defence, 2023). In effect, Australia is planning and equipping for high-intensity conflict inside ASEAN's maritime backyard, while simultaneously reassuring ASEAN via the 2024 Summit (Australian Embassy Jakarta, 2024a) that it is a primary partner for "peace, stability, and prosperity" (ASEAN, 2024a). Managing this contradiction is the central diplomatic challenge for Australia.

This central diplomatic challenge (reconciling Australia's 'minilateral ally' posture with its 'middle power' role) cannot be resolved through capability discussions alone. It is, at its core, an institutional problem. The strategic friction detailed above must be actively managed within the region's existing and emerging diplomatic forums. This analysis now turns to that institutional architecture, assessing the mechanisms available to absorb this friction and maintain ASEAN Centrality.

5. INSTITUTIONAL ARCHITECTURE: BRIDGING THE ASEAN-CENTRIC AND MINILATERAL DIVIDE

The strategic friction created by AUKUS, as detailed above, is not merely a theoretical problem; it manifests as direct, measurable stress on the region's established institutional architecture. Australia's 'minilateral ally' role (Section 2) is thus in direct tension with the inclusive, ASEAN-led frameworks that its 'middle power' role purports to champion. This section, therefore, assesses the viability of these institutions (principally the ADMM-Plus and the ARF) to absorb and manage the diplomatic fallout from Australia's minilateral choices, and to serve as the primary vehicle for its 'middle power' reassurances.

a. The Multilateral Pillar: Australia's Engagement in ADMM-Plus and ARF

The primary arena for Australia's 'middle power' role is through ASEAN-led institutions. Australia actively participates in all key security forums, including the East Asia Summit (EAS), ARF, and ADMM-Plus.

Australia's engagement is active, not passive. Australia co-hosts ARF workshops on critical issues like UNCLOS implementation and enhancing regional maritime law enforcement cooperation (Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, 2024b) and takes leadership roles within the ADMM-Plus, such as co-chairing Experts' Working Groups (EWG). This participation is Australia's political capital. It is tangible proof for skeptical ASEAN members (especially Indonesia and Malaysia) of its lasting commitment to ASEAN Centrality, even as its other actions (i.e., AUKUS) appear to contradict that principle.

b. New Capacity-Building Initiatives: The $64 Million Initiative

The 2024 Special Summit was a conscious effort to institutionalize and fund Australia's 'middle power' role to counter the minilateral narrative. The outcomes are crucial.

Financially, the Maritime Initiative (Wong, 2024a; Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024) is the centerpiece. It is tangible proof of commitment, designed for practical capacity-building in the "white-hull" and "blue" domains (Australian

Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024).

Institutionally, a significant outcome was the establishment of the new ASEAN-Australia Maritime Cooperation Forum, which will run expert and official-level dialogues on maritime issues (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024). Concurrently, academic and practitioner forums, such as the 'Blue Security' Track 2 dialogue, were held to support the summit, providing a channel for non-official expert recommendations.

c. The Critical Need for an Information-Sharing (MDA) Architecture

All practical cooperation (combating IUU, conducting SAR, or coordinating marine pollution responses) depends on Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA). Yet, the architecture remains fragmented. The architecture remains fragmented across a mosaic of overlapping centers (Tran, 2023). These include the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) in Singapore, the International Maritime Bureau's Piracy Reporting Centre (IMB PRC), the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships (ReCAAP) Information Sharing Centre (ISC), and national platforms like Indonesia's BAKAMLA-run MDA portal.

Proposals exist to elevate the 'cyber-maritime security nexus' and enhance cooperation on maritime-based digital infrastructure (Le Thu & Hogeveen, 2022). The largest barrier is political, specifically concerns over sovereignty and trust. States (especially Indonesia) will not hand over sensitive naval and coast guard data to a centralized database run by another country.

The sovereignty barrier is a primary challenge for MDA. ASEAN states are reluctant to feed sensitive positional data (e.g., from their own naval or coast guard Automatic Identification System (AIS) trackers) into a centralized hub, fearing it could be used for intelligence purposes by the hub's host nation or its allies. This fear explains why a 'federated network' model—where each nation retains its own data on its own servers and only shares specific, pre-agreed 'alerts' or 'tracks' (e.g.,

a vessel flagged for IUU)—is considered the most politically viable path forward. This model prioritizes national control over centralized efficiency, addressing the sovereignty concern head-on.

From an operational standpoint, this 'federated' model is a tactical necessity. A nation's complete maritime picture is a core strategic asset. For example, TNI-AL's internal data on its own asset positions or sensitive radar tracks in the Natuna Sea is not 'shareable.' Any viable regional MDA system must therefore be built on a federated (or 'push') model, where a national HQ (like BAKAMLA) shares specific, correlated information, rather than a centralized ('pull') model that grants access to raw, sovereign data streams. This federated approach aligns with the sovereignty-respecting cooperation discussed by regional partners (Tran, 2023; Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2024).

This fragmented architecture, particularly the MDA sovereignty challenge, necessitates a shift from high-level institutional declarations to pragmatic, operational solutions. The following recommendations build directly on this analysis, proposing specific, practitioner-focused actions designed to operationalize the 'middle power' role and manage the 'minilateral ally' friction.

Table 2: Key Maritime Partnership Initiatives from the 2024 ASEAN-Australia Special Summit

Initiative	**Financial Commitment (AUD)**	**Primary Focus / Objective**	**Institutional Relevance**
Southeast Asia Maritime Partnerships Initiative	$64 Million (incl. $40M new)	Practical capacity-building, stability (Wong, 2024a; Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024)	Supports AOIP & ASEAN Maritime Outlook (Wong, 2024a)
ASEAN-Australia Maritime Cooperation Forum	(Funded from $64M initiative)	Expert and official-level dialogues on maritime issues (Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet, 2024)	New institution for de-confliction & trust-building

6. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Moving from analysis to prescription, this section adopts an Indonesian naval practitioner's perspective to propose concrete, operational recommendations. The guiding principle is that ASEAN is not a monolith; a "one-size-fits-all" approach will fail, and cooperation must be "tailored" to diverse local needs.

a. Recommendation 1: Prioritize "White Hull" and "Blue" Cooperation as the Spearhead for Trust

Rationale. The greatest strategic friction lies in the "grey hull" (naval) domain, exacerbated by AUKUS (Li, 2022). The greatest opportunity for rapid, mutually beneficial progress lies in the "white-hull" (coast guard/civilian) and "blue" (environmental/economic) domains (Wong, 2024a).

Proposed Action. Australia should earmark a majority of the Maritime Initiative (Wong, 2024a) for civilian partnerships. This includes: (1) A permanent exchange between Indonesia's BAKAMLA and the ABF (Wong, 2024a), focused on anti-IUU and SAR, building on existing frameworks like Operation Gannet. (2) A joint seabed mapping program between Geoscience Australia (Wong, 2024a) and the TNI-AL's Hydro-Oceanographic Center (*Pusat Hidro-Oseanografi TNI Angkatan Laut*, Pushidrosal) to enhance navigational safety and protect undersea cable infrastructure.

b. Recommendation 2: Create "Tailored" Capacity-Building Networks

Rationale. ASEAN's maritime security needs are diverse. Indonesia's defense needs, as an archipelago, focus on internal security, inter-island surveillance, and chokepoint protection. This differs from the Philippines' external defense needs or Vietnam's Mekong delta security challenges.

Proposed Action. The Maritime Initiative (Wong, 2024a) should be a portfolio fund, creating tailored 'tracks' of capacity building. For example, an "Archipelagic Track" for Indonesia/Philippines (inter-island MDA,

chokepoint security) and a "Mekong Track" for Vietnam/Cambodia/Thailand (riverine security, environmental challenges).

c. Recommendation 3: Institutionalize the "Track 1.5 Maritime Dialogue" as a Strategic Safety Valve

Rationale. Official Track 1 dialogues often lack the frankness required to discuss sensitive strategic issues like AUKUS. A separate, but formally recognized, Track 1.5 dialogue, similar to academic forums run on the 2024 summit's periphery, would create a vital 'safety valve'.

Proposed Action. Indonesia and Australia should propose a permanent, annual Track 1.5 Maritime Dialogue, formally linked to the official ASEAN-Australia Maritime Cooperation Forum. Its mandate should be "ensuring strategic coherence and de-confliction" between the ASEAN-led architecture and minilateral mechanisms, providing a channel for frank discussion outside of public diplomatic confrontation.

This analysis leads to a balanced conclusion.

First, the Australia-ASEAN maritime partnership is now a complex strategic partnership, defined by both immense practical opportunity (symbolized by the 2024 Summit) and profound theoretical tension (exemplified by AUKUS). Australia's 2023 DSR has permanently placed maritime Southeast Asia at the center of its national security calculations (Australian Department of Defence, 2023; Wong, 2024a).

Second, the foundations for cooperation are firm. The CSP (ASEAN, 2023) and the Melbourne Declaration (ASEAN, 2024a) provide a robust normative framework anchored in UNCLOS and a shared commitment to the Blue Economy and tackling non-traditional threats like IUU fishing.

Third, from a naval practitioner's perspective, success depends on operational implementation: building trust through verifiable "white-hull" cooperation (Wong, 2024a), tailoring capacity-building, and investing in a sovereignty-respecting MDA-sharing architecture. This implementation requires overcoming technical hurdles and standardizing

doctrine for 'white-hull' operators, which is the essential work of building interoperability.

Finally, the partnership faces a call to action. ASEAN must manage Australia's engagement to strengthen the regional architecture. Australia's challenge is greater: it must prove through consistent action that its 'minilateral ally' role will not supplant its fundamental 'middle power' role. The Maritime Initiative (Wong, 2024a) is a crucial down payment, but the true currency of partnership remains diplomatic consistency and deference to the ASEAN-led regional order.

7. REFERENCES

ASEAN. (2023). Overview of the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership.https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/01/Overview-of-ASEAN-Australia-CSP_as-of-December-2023.pdf

ASEAN. (2021b). ASEAN leaders' declaration on the blue economy. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/4.-ASEAN-Leaders-Declaration-on-the-Blue-Economy-Final.pdf

ASEAN. (2022, April 28). Co-chair's summary of the 34th ASEAN-Australia Forum. https://asean.org/co-chairs-summary-of-the-34th-asean-australia-forum/

ASEAN. (2023a). ASEAN maritime outlook: First edition. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/08/20231011_AMO-Report-COMPLETE.pdf

ASEAN. (2024a). The Melbourne Declaration – A partnership for the future. ASEAN-Australia Special Summit. https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/03/ASEAN-AU-agreed-Melbourne-Declaration_FINAL.pdf

ASEAN. (2024b). Plan of Action to Implement the ASEAN-Australia Comprehensive Strategic Partnership (2025-2029). https://asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/Adopted-ASEAN-Australia-POA-2025-2029.pdf

ASEAN Regional Forum. (2022, August 4). ARF workplan on maritime security 2022-2026. https://aseanregionalforum.asean.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/11/ARF-Workplan-on-Maritime-Security-Final.pdf

Australian Department of Defence. (2023). Defence strategic review. Australian Government. https://www.defence.gov.au/about/reviews-inquiries/defence-strategic-review

Australian Department of Defence. (2024a, August 12). Indo-Pacific Endeavour 2024 to deepen regional partnerships

Media release

. https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/releases/2024-08-12/indo-pacific-endeavour-2024-deepen-regional-partnerships

Australian Department of Defence. (2024b, November 6). Ambitious amphibious exercise begins. [Media release]. https://www.defence.gov.au/news-events/news/2024-11-06/ambitious-amphibious-exercise-begins

Australian Embassy Jakarta. (2024a, March 6). ASEAN-Australia Special Summit 2024 Media release https://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR24_022.html

Australian Embassy Jakarta. (2024b, November 13). Australia and Indonesia complete joint amphibious exercise. [Media release]. https://indonesia.embassy.gov.au/jakt/MR24_106.html

Australian Government Department of the Prime Minister and Cabinet. (2024). Outcomes summary: 2024 ASEAN-Australia Special Summit. https://www.pmc.gov.au/resources/outcomes-summary

Beeson, M. (2022). AUKUS, the Quad, and the limits of minilateralism. International Affairs, 98(5), 1595–1612. https://www.google.com/search?q=https://doi.org/10.1093/ ia/iiac173

Bradford, J., Djalal, D. P., & Laksmana, E. A. (2023). Maritime security and the blue economy in Southeast Asia: Linkages, impacts and prospects. La Trobe University. https://ro.uow.edu.au/articles/report/Maritime_Security_and_the_Blue_Economy_in_Southeast_Asia_Linkages_Impacts_and_Prospects/30071413

Choong, W., & Storey, I. (2021). Southeast Asian responses to AUKUS: Arms racing, non-proliferation and regional stability (ISEAS Perspective No. 2021/134). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/articles-commentaries/iseas-perspective/2021-134-southeast-asian-responses-to-aukus-arms-racing-non-proliferation-and-regional-stability-by-william-choong-and-ian-storey/

Cooper, A. F., Higgott, R., & Nossal, K. R. (1993). Relocating middle powers: Australia and Canada in a changing world order. UBC Press.

Defense Security Cooperation Agency. (2024). Indo-Pacific Maritime Security Initiative (MSI). U.S. Department of Defense. https://samm.dsca.mil/program/MSI

Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. (2024b). Australia's involvement in the ARF. Australian Government. https://www.dfat.gov.au/international-relations/regional-architecture/asean-regional-forum-arf

Dung, P. X., & Son, T. M. (2023). Tides of insecurity: Vietnam and the growing challenge from non-traditional maritime threats. ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/TRS5_23.pdf

Isjchwansyah, Y. R. (2025, March 27). Budget cuts threaten to sink the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency's operations. East Asia Forum. https://eastasiaforum.org/2025/03/27/budget-cuts-threaten-to-sink-the-indonesian-maritime-security-agencys-operations/

Le Thu, H., & Hogeveen, B. (2022). UK, Australia and ASEAN cooperation for safer seas: A case for elevating the cyber–maritime security nexus.

Australian Strategic Policy Institute. https://www.aspi.org.au/report/uk-australia-and-asean-cooperation-safer-seas

Li, M. (2022). ASEAN's responses to AUKUS: Implications for strategic realignments in the Indo-Pacific. China International Strategy Review, 4(2), 268–287. https://doi.org/ 10.1007/s42533-022-00121-2

Tran, B. (2023). Vietnam's quest for enhanced maritime domain awareness (ISEAS Perspective 2023/96). ISEAS–Yusof Ishak Institute. https://www.iseas.edu.sg/wp-content/uploads/ 2024/01/ISEAS_Perspective_2023_96.pdf

Tzinieris, S., & Leoni, Z. (2025). Fortress AUKUS: order-engineering by exclusion in the Indo-Pacific. International Politics, 1–20. https://doi.org/10.1057/s41311-025-00710-z

Wong, P. (2024a, March 4). New funding for maritime partnerships in Southeast Asia. [Media release]. Minister for Foreign Affairs. https://www.foreignminister.gov.au/ minister/ penny-wong/media-release/new-funding-maritime-partnerships-southeast-asia

BIOGRAPHY

Salim

Salim, S.E., M.Phil., M.Tr.Opsla. is a graduate of the Indonesian Naval Academy, class of 1995, born in Surabaya. He currently serves as the Head of the Maritime Research Center at Seskoal and has held various command positions aboard Indonesian warships and fleets. An accomplished writer, he has published numerous articles and books in both military and civilian media. Salim completed a Master's in Security Studies at Madras University and the National Defence College (equivalent to Lemhanas RI) in New Delhi, and is currently enrolled in a Doctoral Program at the University of Airlangga in Surabaya.