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ASEAN Cooperative Security in Addressing Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea

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ABSTRACT

Southeast Asia possesses vital international shipping lanes for world trade, including the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Singapore, and the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea. While the openness of these sea lanes has driven regional economic growth, it has also created opportunities for maritime crime, particularly piracy and armed robbery that have proliferated in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea since the mid-2010s, driven in part by the activities of the Abu Sayyaf Group. This article aims to analyze how the cooperative security approach has been applied by ASEAN in maritime security cooperation to address this threat. Using a descriptive-qualitative method based on library research and secondary data, this study finds that responses to the threat in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea operate at two complementary levels: trilateral sub-regional cooperation (the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement and the Trilateral Maritime Patrol Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines) and the broader ASEAN maritime security cooperation framework under the ASEAN Political-Security Community (ADMM, ADMM-Plus, AMMTC, ARF, and AMF). This cooperative practice reflects the five principles of cooperative security: inclusivity, confidence-building measures, a cooperative approach, comprehensive security, and indivisibility. However, the principle of state sovereignty constrains actor involvement. This study offers two findings that enrich the discussion: the need to strengthen coast guard cooperation through the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACGF), and the importance of a social development approach to complement a security approach that has thus far been dominated by law-enforcement and military methods.

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■ INTRODUCTION

Southeast Asia's environment is dominated by two elements: water and forest. On the one hand, the region has been relatively free from the large-scale migrations and invasions from Central Asia that India and China experienced; on the other hand, it has always been open to inter-oceanic trade and has sea lanes that greatly benefit coastal communities (Witjaksono, 2017). The region's strong economic growth has gone hand in hand with rising trade traffic through its waterways, such as the Strait of Malacca, the Strait of Singapore, the Lombok Strait, and the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea. This has led Southeast Asian states to recognize the importance of maritime cooperation, since disruptions along these routes could jeopardize regional stability as a whole.

Security issues in the region generally fall into two categories: traditional and non-traditional threats. Traditional issues still dominate the maritime security domain, but non-traditional threats, including piracy and armed robbery, have gained prominence as globalization has increased. This shifting strategic maritime environment has driven Southeast Asian states to address and prevent maritime crime, given that seaborne trade involves high-value cargo vulnerable to disruptions in port and vessel security.

One of the most prominent flashpoints of these non-traditional threats is the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea, a tri-border area between the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia that serves as a busy commercial shipping route while also being prone to piracy, armed robbery, and the kidnapping of crew members. Most of these crimes have been linked to the Abu Sayyaf Group, based in the southern Philippines. The three littoral states, along with ASEAN as the regional institution, have taken several steps to respond to this threat, ranging from trilateral cooperation to the broader maritime security cooperation framework under the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC).

This massive response shows why the threat warrants sustained academic attention.

Following a series of kidnappings by the Abu Sayyaf group between March and July 2016, Indonesia temporarily suspended coal shipments to the Philippines. The Indonesian Coordinating Minister for Political, Legal and Security Affairs even described the threat as a situation that could turn the region into a "new Somalia", a phrase illustrating how quickly a local criminal issue was redefined as a regional security emergency (Parameswaran, 2016). This redefinition prompted a concrete institutional response within a short timeframe: the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement was agreed upon in a matter of weeks in May 2016, followed by the Indonesia-Malaysia-Philippines Trilateral Maritime Patrol in mid-2017, as well as ongoing coordination through mechanisms such as Trilateral Air Patrols and the subsequent establishment of a dedicated Contact Group to address maritime crime in the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas. However, analyses of these events tend to either present the series of agreements in isolation from the broader ASEAN institutional architecture or discuss ASEAN-level cooperation in the abstract, without linking it back to the actual situation in the waters of the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas.

The problem is that accounts of these cooperative measures, whether trilateral or through ASEAN's sectoral bodies, are often presented descriptively without being framed within a consistent analytical lens, making it difficult to assess the extent to which this pattern of cooperation truly reflects the principle of cooperative security, and where its application remains limited. This article addresses that gap by systematically situating all the cooperative measures taken by Southeast Asian states within the cooperative security framework.

Based on the foregoing, the research question is: How has ASEAN applied cooperative security in maritime security cooperation to address the threat of piracy and armed robbery in the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas? To answer this question, the article aims to (1) map the characteristics and patterns of the piracy/armed-robbery threat in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea and its main actors, (2) outline the cooperative measures taken at both the trilateral level and within the ASEAN framework, and (3) analyze the extent to which these measures reflect the five principles of cooperative security.

■ LITERATURE REVIEW

Cooperative security is a concept first put forward by former Canadian and Australian Foreign Ministers Joe Clark and Gareth Evans in the early 1990s at the United Nations General Assembly (Mack & Kerr, 2010; Banerjee, 1999), as a proposal aimed at replacing the Cold War security structure of balance of power, underpinned by military alliances, with a multilateral framework for nuclear prevention that promoted both military and non-military security (Dewitt, 1994). Gareth Evans described cooperative security as an effort to favor dialogue over confrontation, reassurance over denial, transparency over secrecy, prevention over correction, and interdependence over unilateralism (Evans, 1994).

This concept matters for several reasons (Moodie, 2000). First, new problems have emerged that no single state can address alone, for instance, environmental issues, migration, organized crime, drug trafficking, and terrorism, while traditional problems have also grown more complex, making it difficult for states to secure their interests unilaterally. Second, security competition has failed. During the Cold War, states pursued their security goals through traditional approaches such as expanding military capacity or seeking local and regional dominance, which generated tensions among states and fueled hostility and conflict.

Finally, cooperative security assumes that a conducive environment is essential, since the disintegration of internal political structures raises questions about certain states' ability to maintain coherence and meet their societies' basic needs. State failure tends to trigger greater violence that may not be contained within state borders. The global and regional implications of disintegrating state political structures underscore the importance of cooperation in mitigating the resulting harm. More broadly, it may only be within the context of regional cooperation that domestic political stability and the strengthening of domestic political, economic, and social structures in beleaguered states can be achieved, a strategic principle that seeks to pursue objectives through as many institutions as possible, rather than through the threat of material or physical coercion (Moodie, 2000).

Promoting cooperative security through an international regime requires all parties to respond effectively to instances of non-compliance. When non-compliance goes unpunished, the regime weakens, and if significant non-compliance persists too long, it will collapse (Moodie, 2000). When applied to post-Cold War multilateralism in the Asia-Pacific, cooperative security rests on several core principles. First, it assumes that institutionalizing post-Cold War security relations in the Asia-Pacific is a slow, gradual process. Second, this institutionalization was not initially intended to replace existing regional alliances, but rather to promote security more broadly. Third, cooperative security arrangements are based on

inclusivity and aim to promote a 'habit of dialogue' among all regional states. Finally, this principle also encompasses informal diplomacy, or 'Track Two diplomacy,' which involves ongoing communication among academics, non-governmental organizations, and other non-state actors, as well as dialogue with governments, for example through ASEAN.

Cooperative security is a process in which states with shared interests work together through agreed mechanisms to reduce tension and suspicion, resolve or ease disputes, build trust, enhance prospects for economic development, and maintain regional stability. Cooperative security is a strategic system centered on liberal democratic states that are connected through networks of alliances and formal or informal institutions, characterized by shared values and practical, transparent economic, political, and defense cooperation (Cohen & Mihalka, 2001).

Efforts to define and shape this concept generally reflect a liberal view of the future of world security. Proponents advocate acting collectively through as many international institutions as possible. They contend that democracies are more likely to emerge through a security-cooperation regime and that democracies have historically tended not to go to war with one another. Cooperative security seeks to overcome the weaknesses of traditional collective security without condoning aggression by any party, making international cooperation an effort to prevent and thwart aggression.

Proponents of cooperative security believe it is now more effective at achieving its goals. Interstate regional conflict remains an important concern for its proponents, and cross-border aggression is never acceptable. Internal state conflicts, meanwhile, pose a serious challenge for this strategy.

The cooperative security strategy encourages the inclusion of non-state actors, international organizations, and states with differing ideologies through informal forums. It also rests on the principle that stability can be achieved only when actions and effects across the diplomatic, informational, military, economic, political, and civil domains are coordinated (Framework Document 05/2011, 2011). According to Acharya (2007), cooperative security is a system for building trust and transparency to reduce tension and conflict within a group of states. This definition points to a conception of cooperative security more oriented toward building Confidence Building Measures (CBM) among members and avoiding internal conflict, rather than focusing primarily on securing against external threats (Carter et al., 1993). Non-military and non-coercive means of achieving security among all participants, without categorizing them as friend or foe, constitute a cooperative approach that matters because it is inclusive, excludes no party or treats any as an adversary, and avoids using non-military force for coercive purposes (Katsumata, 2009).

This definition contains two crucial elements. First, inclusivity or indivisibility: security is inclusive, with no party excluded or treated as an adversary; security is treated as 'indivisible' and is pursued through cooperative effort. Second, the non-use of military force for coercive purposes: this defining characteristic distinguishes cooperative security from conventional security mechanisms such as collective defense and collective security (Katsumata, 2009).

The primary aim of cooperative security arrangements is to prevent war, chiefly by preventing avenues of aggression. To be useful and effective, cooperative security must therefore look inward and outward and incorporate two dimensions: individual security and the active promotion of stability (Cohen & Mihalka, 2001). Individual security, or human security, has become an important agenda item for the international community, focusing on human security at the global level, where individuals are vulnerable to a range of threats originating from within and beyond the state. Cooperative security therefore incorporates individual security as a crucial element in creating stability. As for the active promotion of stability, stability can be disrupted not only by the danger of interstate conflict but also by mass violations of individual security in neighboring states; how stability can be developed, restored, and preserved in the surrounding world must remain an active concern of states within a cooperative security system (Cohen & Mihalka, 2001).

According to Dewitt and Acharya, the three foundations of cooperative security consist of inclusivity, the habit of dialogue, and cooperative action (Mily Ming-Tzu Kao, 2011). First, inclusivity recognizes the role of both state and non-state actors, particularly international organizations, in providing and enhancing security, reflecting a broader conceptualization of security that encompasses not only traditional concerns such as interstate military representation, but also increasingly prominent non-traditional security issues such as transnational crime. Second, cooperative security arrangements begin with dialogue among specific participants; states must take part in regular bilateral and multilateral discussions on shared security concerns and the best available approaches to addressing them.

Over time, regular dialogue can foster openness, transparency, and predictability,

reducing the potential for conflict arising from misunderstanding. Finally, cooperative security highlights that many contemporary security issues cannot be resolved by a single state alone, requiring cooperative action to address security problems facing all members. Accordingly, the cooperative security system's commitment rests on (SIPRI, 1996): (1) trust based on openness, transparency, and predictability; (2) mutual reassurance; and (3) legitimacy, based on members' acceptance that military constraints under the regime substantially determine their security.

Accordingly, the concept of cooperative security must meet the following criteria (SIPRI, 1996): (1) comprehensiveness, defined as the recognition of the relationship between the maintenance of peace and respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, as well as economic, cultural, legal, and environmental cooperation; (2) indivisibility, which demands a joint effort in pursuing security interests, since the security of each state or group of states cannot be separated from one another; and (3) a cooperative approach, as embodied in mutually reinforcing and complementary institutions, in various forms of regional and sub-regional cooperation.

According to Emmers (2003), ASEAN should be regarded as a cooperative security regime for several reasons. First, ASEAN promotes norms and principles that underpin an intramural code of conduct and has established conflict-management mechanisms based on avoidance rather than resolution. Second, ASEAN has built an institutional framework of multilateral discussion structures, including summit meetings of heads of state and government, ministerial-level meetings, and ad hoc sessions; institutional arrangements such as the Bali Concord, the TAC, and ZOPFAN; and informal interaction processes known as the 'ASEAN Way.' The ARF's establishment shows many characteristics of an embryonic regime for more structured cooperative security, extending the 'ASEAN Way.' The ARF has fostered multilateral dialogue, enhanced transparency, and applied confidence-building measures (Emmers, 2003b).

The cooperative security approach also seeks to ensure security without undermining national security while moving beyond a purely bilateral approach (Banerjee, 1999). This approach therefore also accommodates the extensive bilateral cooperation undertaken by ASEAN member states. In addition, the cooperative security model is well suited to Asian states, where (a) territories are too large and too diverse, and (b) security threats often remain internal to states rather than interstate, making state sovereignty the foundation of national security (Singh, 2004).

Katsumata (2009), meanwhile, identifies distinctive features of ASEAN's cooperative security initiatives. First, ASEAN has promoted cooperation through dialogue and consultation, pursuing an informal approach to cooperative security. Second, it has built a layered structure, using multiple dialogue channels at different levels to advance security cooperation. Third, ASEAN has consistently committed to its founding principles. Although some may argue that a small power's efforts to enhance regional security through dialogue and mutual understanding are naive, ASEAN states have remained consistently committed to their initial policies (Katsumata, 2009).

Drawing on these propositions, this concept helps explain how ASEAN conducts maritime security cooperation to address non-traditional crimes such as piracy and armed robbery. As a policy choice, cooperative security promotes confidence-building measures, defense exchanges, security dialogue, and multilateral frameworks. It encourages greater 'transparency' of military capabilities, which can reduce mistrust among states by facilitating effective threat assessment among participating states. States achieve greater transparency by sharing intelligence reports, exchanging observers at military exercises, and jointly inspecting military bases.

A core component of cooperative security is confidence-building and Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) that enhance regional transparency. ASEAN has led multilateral security cooperation in Southeast Asia. ASEAN has taken several initiatives to enhance cooperation among its members and with external powers, thereby developing cooperative security as a channel for security dialogue. To build this dialogue, ASEAN maintains several mechanisms, including ministerial-level meetings among member states.

ASEAN's cooperative security model is an exercise in norm-building, with the ARF as one model of ASEAN cooperation. In this arena, Southeast Asian states practice their norms and aim to share them with non-ASEAN states. ASEAN's security cooperation norm holds that states should pursue security cooperatively and non-militarily by enhancing mutual understanding and trust through dialogue and consultation. ASEAN's concept of cooperative security aims to contribute to security and stability through political dialogue, transparency, and confidence- and information-building via the APSC. ASEAN aims to create a secure region

through dialogue, regarded as a CBM and as one application of the cooperative security concept.

In this study, the five principles mentioned above are treated not merely as descriptive labels but as operational parameters for analyzing the empirical material. Specifically, inclusivity is assessed based on which actors -whether ASEAN as an institution, individual member states, or external partners- actually play an operational role within a given cooperative arrangement; confidence-building measures are evaluated based on the existence and regularity of dialogue mechanisms (such as ministerial meetings, information-sharing protocols, and direct communication channels or hotlines), rather than solely on stated objectives; the cooperative approach is assessed based on whether outcomes within the arrangement are reached through negotiated agreements rather than unilateral actions; comprehensive security is measured by whether an arrangement addresses vulnerabilities at the individual or societal level, in addition to responding to state-level threats; and the principle of indivisibility is assessed based on the presence of coordinated, reciprocal commitments (such as joint exercises, the deployment of liaison officers, and joint patrol corridors), rather than merely parallel yet independent national measures.

■ METHOD

Research Design

This study used a qualitative research design to examine how ASEAN maritime security cooperation operates in practice to address piracy and armed robbery in the Sulu–Sulawesi Seas. A qualitative approach was appropriate because the study focused on the roles, interactions, and institutional practices of actors involved in maritime security cooperation rather than on measuring the frequency or magnitude of cooperation. The analysis therefore concentrated on how relevant institutions participated in and interpreted existing cooperative arrangements, particularly the Trilateral Cooperative Agreement (TCA), the Trilateral Maritime Patrol (TMP) IndoMalPhi, and relevant ASEAN sectoral mechanisms.

The empirical research focused on actors directly involved in formulating, coordinating, or implementing maritime security cooperation. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and documentary research. The interviews provided first-hand accounts of institutional roles, coordination practices, and the implementation of cooperative arrangements, while documentary sources established the formal frameworks in which these practices took place.

Informants

Informants were selected purposively based on their institutional position, expertise, and direct involvement in ASEAN maritime security cooperation. The selection focused on actors whose responsibilities were relevant to maritime security, defense and security cooperation, maritime surveillance, or the implementation of cooperative arrangements addressing piracy and armed robbery. This included officials from Indonesian government institutions, the Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla), the Indonesian Navy, and the embassies of the Philippines and Malaysia.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with the selected informants. The interview guide covered four main areas: (1) the informant's institutional role in maritime security cooperation; (2) their assessment of piracy and armed robbery patterns in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea; (3) their institution's involvement in the TCA, TMP IndoMalPhi, and relevant ASEAN sectoral bodies; and (4) their assessment of the extent to which cooperation in practice reflected the five cooperative-security principles used in this study's analytical framework. The semi-structured format allowed the researcher to maintain consistency across interviews while pursuing additional issues that emerged from individual informants' institutional experiences.

The final informant composition reflected the availability and relevance of actors in the research sites and institutional settings. The informants are presented in Table 1.

Data Collection

Field research was conducted in Jakarta, Makassar, and Tarakan, corresponding to the locations of the institutions and informants included in the study. These locations were selected because they represented different institutional levels and operational settings within Indonesia's maritime security cooperation. Jakarta provided access to national-level government agencies and foreign diplomatic missions involved in maritime security cooperation. In contrast, Makassar and Tarakan provided access to naval and operational actors closer to the study's relevant maritime areas.

Primary data were obtained through semi-structured interviews with institutional actors directly involved in maritime security cooperation. Interviews focused on implementing cooperative arrangements, institutional responsibilities, inter-agency coordination, and interactions with partner countries and ASEAN mechanisms. The interviews also explored how actors understood

Table 1. Research Informants

No.	Institution	Informant/Position	Location
1	Ministry of Foreign Affairs	Second Secretary, Political, Legal and Security Affairs	Jakarta
		Staff, Political, Legal and Security Affairs	Jakarta
2	Coordinating Ministry for Maritime Affairs and Investment	Head, Maritime Security and Surveillance Division	Jakarta
3	Indonesian Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) Headquarters	Director of Operations	Jakarta
4	Embassy of the Philippines in Indonesia	Defense Attaché	Jakarta
5	Embassy of Malaysia in Indonesia	Defense Attaché	Jakarta
6	Main Naval Base (Lantamal) VI Makassar		Makassar
7	Main Naval Base Command (Lantamal) XIII Tarakan	Maritime Command Center (MCC) Indonesia	Tarakan

the practical operation of the TCA, TMP IndoMalPhi, and related ASEAN cooperation in addressing piracy and armed robbery.

Secondary data were collected through documentary research. These materials included official agreements and policy documents, institutional reports, maritime security reports, and relevant academic publications. Particular attention was given to the TCA, documents on the TMP IndoMalPhi, ASEAN documents on maritime security cooperation, and reports from institutions such as ReCAAP. These documentary sources were used to establish the formal structure of cooperation and to contextualize interview accounts.

Data Analysis and Triangulation

Interview and documentary data were analyzed thematically in accordance with the study's research questions and analytical framework. Interview transcripts and notes were reviewed to identify recurring information concerning institutional roles, patterns of coordination, implementation of cooperative arrangements, and the practical application of the five cooperative-security principles. Relevant information was then compared across informants and institutional settings to identify areas of convergence and divergence.

Documentary materials were analyzed alongside interview data to distinguish between the formal design of maritime security cooperation and its implementation in practice. This comparison was particularly important for examining whether the institutional arrangements established through the TCA, TMP IndoMalPhi, and ASEAN mechanisms were reflected in participating actors' reported practices.

Data-source triangulation was subsequently employed to assess the credibility of the findings. Claims obtained from interviews were cross-checked against official agreements, institutional reports, academic literature, and relevant media reports. Documentary evidence was also compared across sources where necessary. Where information from an informant was consistent with documentary evidence or corroborated by other sources, it was used to strengthen the empirical interpretation. When an account could not be independently corroborated, the study treated it as an informant's account or perception rather than as fact. This process allowed the study to distinguish between formally documented arrangements and actors' accounts of how cooperation operated in practice.

■ RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The Sulu–Sulawesi Sea as a Strategic Route

The Sulu–Sulawesi maritime area constitutes a transboundary maritime space shared by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. It encompasses the Sulu Sea and the Celebes (Sulawesi) Sea and forms part of the broader Sulu–Sulawesi Marine Ecoregion (SSME), a transboundary marine region that extends across the three countries' maritime jurisdictions (Coral Triangle Initiative on Coral Reefs, Fisheries and Food Security (CTI-CFF), 2013). The SSME covers about 1 million km² and encompasses the Sulu and Celebes/Sulawesi Seas, making it a geographically extensive and interconnected maritime space (CTI-CFF, 2013).

The Celebes (Sulawesi) Sea extends about 675 km north to south and 837 km east to west, covers about 280,000 km², and reaches a maximum depth of about 6,200 meters (Encyclopedia Britannica, 2019). Its extensive geographical coverage, shared maritime boundaries, and interconnected sea lanes make the Sulu–Sulawesi maritime area strategically important but jurisdictionally complex for maritime security cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines.

The two seas' adjacent position makes this area an alternative shipping route to and from East Asia; at least half of Southeast Asia's commercial shipping activity passes through it. According to ReCAAP's annual report, more than 100,000 vessels transit this area each year, carrying about 55 million tons of cargo, mostly coal, with a total value of US$800,000,000 (ReCAAP, 2016b). Indonesia supplies nearly 96 percent of the Philippines' coal needs, with bilateral trade reaching US$4.6 billion and Indonesia earning a profit of approximately US$3.19 billion (Gumilang, 2016).

This high economic value is matched by the region's vulnerability to maritime crime. This disparity is reflected in national statistics: the Philippine Statistics Authority recorded a poverty rate of 66.7% in Sulu Province in 2018, about four times the national average of 16.7% for the same year (PSA, 2019), despite the province's location along a resource-rich, strategically valuable shipping route. The geographical distribution of selected piracy and armed robbery incidents examined in this study is presented in Figure 1. The incidents concentrated around the waters of Tawi-Tawi and Sabah, as well as near the Indonesia–Philippines maritime boundary. The spatial distribution illustrates that maritime security threats were not confined to a single national jurisdiction but occurred across and around the maritime boundaries connecting the three countries.

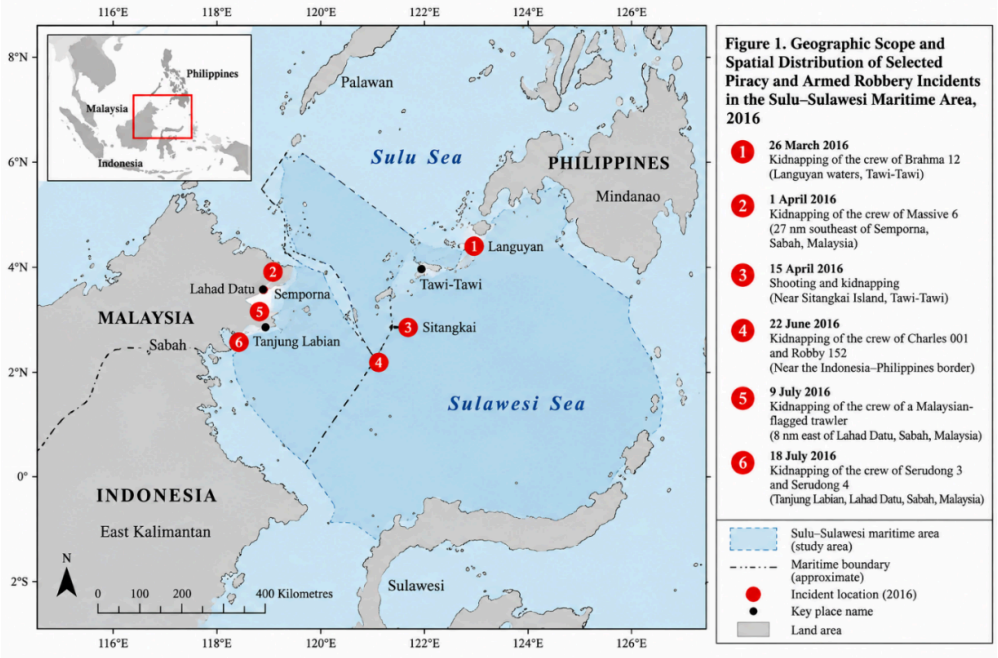

Figure 1. Geographic Scope and Spatial Distribution of Selected Piracy and Armed Robbery Incidents in the Sulu–Sulawesi Maritime Area, 2016

According to Kusen (2020), at least four factors explain why the Sulu Sea has become a threat-prone area: (1) The communities of the Sulu area fall under the jurisdiction of the Malaysian and Philippine governments, yet their level of economic development and welfare differs sharply from the core regions of both countries; (2) Abundant natural resources stand in stark contrast to the level of poverty in coastal areas; (3) Government attention to improving welfare is considered inadequate, alongside weak territorial surveillance; (4) The emergence of groups demanding independence, such as the Moro National Liberation Front (MNLF, founded 1969) and the Abu Sayyaf Group/ASG (founded 1991).

Piracy incidents in the Sulu Sea generally occur in the territorial waters of Malaysia and the Philippines, with the highest concentration around the border between the two countries. Table 2 summarizes six crew-kidnapping cases recorded throughout 2016.

Table 2. Incidents of Piracy and Armed Robbery in the Sulu Sea by the Abu Sayyaf Group (2016)

Date	Case	Victims	Location
26 March 2016	Kidnapping of the crew of Brahma 12	10 Indonesian nationals kidnapped	Languyan waters, Tawi-Tawi
1 April 2016	Kidnapping of the crew of Massive 6	4 Malaysian nationals kidnapped	27 nm southeast of Semporna, Sabah, Malaysia
15 April 2016	Shooting and kidnapping	1 injured, 4 Indonesian nationals	Near Sitangkai Island, Tawi-Tawi
22 June 2016	Kidnapping of the crew of Charles 001 and Robby 152	7 Indonesian nationals	Near the Indonesia–Philippines border
9 July 2016	Kidnapping of the crew of a Malaysian-flagged trawler	3 Indonesian nationals	8 nm east of Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia
18 July 2016	Kidnapping of the crew of Serudong 3 and Serudong 4	5 Malaysian nationals	Tanjung Labian, Lahad Datu, Sabah, Malaysia

Source: compiled from ReCAAP ISC publications (2016), as cited in Sandria (2017).

Referring to the Indonesia–Philippines Navy-to-Navy Talk document, at least four factors drive the prevalence of armed robbery in this area: slow-moving vessels with low decks are the primary target; most incidents are concentrated around the Malaysia–Philippines border; the perpetrators' ability to exploit gaps in patrols indicates familiarity with the operational area; and there are indications of coordination between actors at sea and networks on land (ReCAAP Information Sharing Center, 2017).

This regional decline occurred before the escalation that this article focuses on. The wave of incidents involving Abu Sayyaf began in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas in March 2016, as documented by the 2016–2017 data in Table 2 (above) and the subsequent section. This timing is no coincidence. In its retrospective analysis of 1,822 incidents recorded between 2007 and 2021, the ReCAAP Information Sharing Center identified the hijacking of vessels for ransom as the dominant type of piracy and armed robbery incident -particularly during the 2016–2020 period- prior to the disruption of this pattern following the apprehension of several kidnapping networks (ReCAAP ISC, cited in Lee, 2022). This periodization, drawn from the region's incident-reporting body, places the escalation examined in this article within the context of the evolving threat documented during the study period, rather than using the broader downward trend observed earlier (2003–2007) as the relevant historical benchmark. International concern over the piracy threat has been driven by several factors (Bateman, 2006): first, piracy incidents are seen as raising the risk of terrorist attacks on vessels, so that efforts to counter piracy are also seen as reducing that risk; second, China, Japan, and South Korea's dependence on energy supplies from the Middle East makes the security of tankers transiting Southeast Asia's chokepoints a strategic interest; third, the extensive involvement of the United States in the Middle East makes the mobility of its fleet between the Indian and Pacific Oceans a matter of concern as well; and fourth, regional maritime powers have strategic motivations to build a presence in Southeast Asia, with the threat of piracy and terrorism often used to justify that presence.

In terms of modus operandi, Raymond (2007) identifies four categories of pirate action in Southeast Asian waters: attacks on ports and berthed vessels; theft from ships at sea; hijacking of ships at sea; and kidnapping for ransom. Perpetrators can likewise be grouped into three categories: small, unorganized, opportunistic criminal groups; more highly trained criminal syndicates equipped with modern equipment; and terrorist groups, which generally target not the ship or cargo but the crew, to be held hostage. The prevalence of piracy in this region has also been linked to the impact of the 1997 Asian financial crisis, which worsened the region's economic and political conditions, as well as a series of attacks on large tankers in the late 1990s, such as the Petro Ranger (Singapore), the Tenyu (Thailand), and the Atlanta (Indonesia) (Roach, 2005).

Profile and Motives of the Abu Sayyaf Group

One of the most prominent actors behind the kidnapping and piracy incidents in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea is the Abu Sayyaf Group (ASG), a separatist group based in the southern Philippines, spanning the Sulu Sea, Sulawesi, Tawi-Tawi, and Sabah. The Philippine Department of National Defense has described this tri-border area as having *"long been a hub for transnational organized crime and terrorist threats, with its porous borders and subtle governance"* (26 January 2017, as cited in Sandria, 2017).

Most ASG members come from communities with a maritime tradition, giving them extensive knowledge of sea conditions that facilitates their movements; the group is also equipped with thermal cameras, binoculars, radios, satellite and telephone networks, and speedboats (R. Banlaoi, 2005). Recruitment has drawn heavily on former members of the MNLF and the Moro Islamic Liberation Front (MILF) from Basilan, Sulu, Tawi-Tawi, Zamboanga City, and Santos City, aided by conditions of poverty and unemployment estimated at 30 percent (Hutchison, 2009).

Abdulrajak Janjalani, a veteran of the Soviet-Afghan War with close ties to Osama bin Laden while residing in Pakistan during the 1980s, founded ASG and studied Islamic jurisprudence in Mecca (R. Banlaoi, 2005; Wibisono, 2016). The founding motivation for ASG rested on a narrative of injustice against Muslims in the southern Philippines, aiming to establish an independent state in western Mindanao and the Sulu Archipelago (Atkinson, 2012), an agenda that subsequently expanded into violence not solely driven by ethnic and religious motives, but also serving to finance the organization (Counter Extremism Project, 2015). This shift does not reflect an abandonment of the separatist agenda but rather an adaptation. Sustaining an armed insurgency in one of the Philippines' poorest regions requires resources that ideological appeals alone cannot provide; meanwhile, ransom-seeking offers a self-financing alternative as state and international pressure cuts off other funding channels. Thus, the organization's ideological framework and its criminal financing methods evolved as complementary, rather than contradictory, logics.

Pressure from the Philippine military that constrained ASG's funding drove the group toward kidnapping for ransom (Pujayanti, 2016). ASG was initially classified as an ordinary criminal group by the Philippine government, before being designated a terrorist organization by the Philippine National Police following the bombing of the MV Doulos (1991), and was placed on the United States' list of international terrorist organizations on 8 October 1997, several years before the September 11, 2001 attacks (U.S. Department of State, 1997; Banlaoi, 2008). The Global Terrorism Database records 108 terrorist incidents attributed to ASG between 1970 and 2014, with 158 victims; combined with the MILF, the MNLF, and the New People's Army, the total number of kidnapping cases in the Philippines over the past 40 years reaches 455 (Global Terrorism Database, 2016). ReCAAP recorded 59 victims of ASG kidnappings between 2016 and 2017 (ReCAAP, 2017), including the kidnapping of 10 Indonesian crew members (BBC Indonesia, 2017), 4 Malaysian crew members in the waters off Ligitan Island (Republika.co.id, 2016), the attack on the vessels Henry and Cristi en route to Tarakan (Kompas.com, 2016), the shooting and kidnapping of German tourists off Tanjung Pisuk, Sabah (Republika.co.id, 2016), and the attack on the Vietnamese-flagged vessel MV Royale 16 in the waters off Basilan (Republika.co.id, 2017).

ASG has also been reported to have expanded its activities through ammunition trafficking, weapons procurement, and training in guerrilla warfare and bomb-making from Al-Qaeda networks and other Middle Eastern terrorist groups (Counter Extremism Project, 2015). Other pirate groups have also emulated ASG's apparent success with hostage-for-ransom tactics; paying ransom risks encouraging similar attacks to escalate (Raymond, 2007).

Cooperative Response: From International Legal Obligation to Trilateral Cooperation

The security of sea lines of communication (SLOCs) is a shared interest of all states that use maritime routes. Coastal states are responsible for securing the 12-nautical-mile national coastal zone and the exclusive economic zone (EEZ), while the international community shares responsibility for high-seas security. The United Nations plays a key role as the driver of internationally accepted norms and regimes governing maritime space -through the IMO on safety matters, UNCLOS on the maritime constitutional order, and the UN Security Council on security matters- while regional organizations such as ASEAN play an important role in SLOC security at the regional level.

Article 100 of UNCLOS 1982 obliges states to cooperate to suppress piracy, including through naval patrols, intelligence sharing, law-enforcement capacity, and the extradition and prosecution of suspected pirates, supported by strong internal communication among law-enforcement and diplomatic agencies (Kraska, 2011). The IMO also issued Resolution A.738(18) in 1993, requiring governments to make piracy prevention their highest priority and

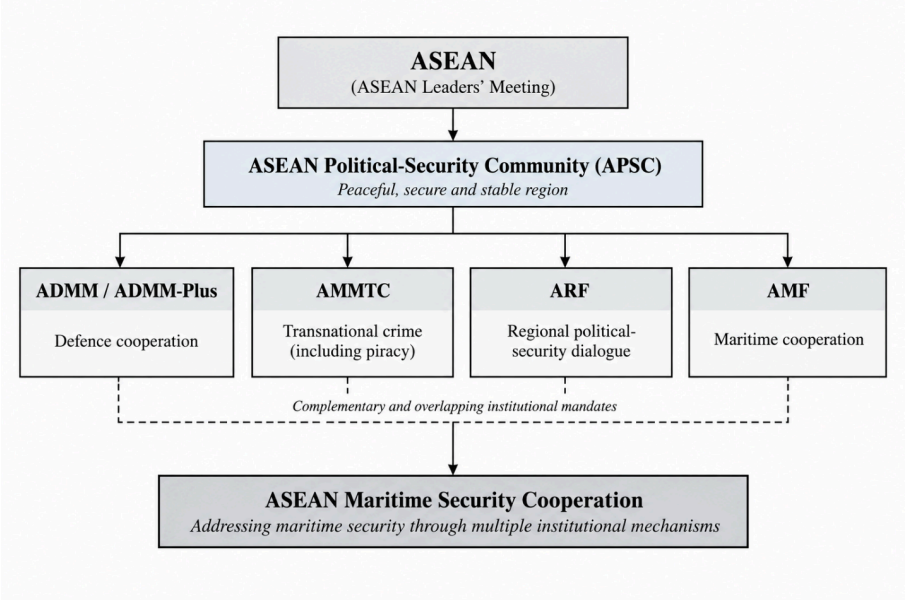

Figure 2. ASEAN Institutional Mapping Relevant to Maritime Security Cooperation

encouraging closer relations among neighboring states, enhanced surveillance and detection, and coordinated patrols.

In response to these obligations, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines initiated the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) in 2016, holding its first meeting in Yogyakarta on 5 May 2016 to develop a cooperative framework to address the growing incidence of piracy and armed robbery. Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines subsequently operationalized this framework through the Trilateral Maritime Patrol Indonesia–Malaysia–Philippines (TMP IndoMalPhi), established under the Framework: Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement on Immediate Measures to Address Security Issues in the Maritime Areas of Common Concern, signed on 14 July 2016. The arrangement encompasses five key areas of cooperation (Sandria, 2017): (1) Maritime Patrol and Rendering Immediate Assistance: operationalizing maritime patrols and providing immediate assistance in agreed areas; (2) Information Intelligence Sharing: regulating the exchange of information and intelligence, covering operational details, intelligence operations, and task organization units; (3) Combined Communication Plan: making use of all available communication channels to achieve regional maritime security; (4) Maritime Air Patrol: adapting the 'Eyes in the Sky' concept from the Strait of Malacca, combined with sea patrols, and also carried out on a coordinated basis by each state individually; (5) Transit and Proposed Security Corridors: establishing a Transit Corridor route for merchant vessels, with Maritime Coordinating Centres in each state, encompassing the Maritime Area of Common Concern, Unilateral Patrol Corridor, and Joint Patrol Corridor. This trilateral cooperation constitutes a concrete response by the three littoral states to a threat that has harmed not only themselves but also the states whose vessels use this shipping route.

ASEAN's Maritime Security Cooperation Framework (APSC)

At the regional level, ASEAN carries out maritime security cooperation through several sectoral bodies under the ASEAN Political-Security Community (APSC). The ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) promotes mutual trust among defense ministers through confidence-building measures, seminars, workshops, training, and exercises, as well as practical cooperation on traditional and non-traditional issues such as disaster relief, emergency response, peacekeeping, post-conflict peacebuilding, and humanitarian assistance. ADMM-Plus, as its expanded form, focuses on practical cooperation in maritime security, counterterrorism, humanitarian assistance and disaster management, peacekeeping, military medicine, and cybersecurity.

The ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime (AMMTC) addresses transnational crimes such as piracy, terrorism, drug trafficking, human trafficking and smuggling, money laundering, arms smuggling, international economic crime, cybercrime, and the smuggling of endangered wildlife and illegal timber. The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) is an inclusive security arrangement involving nearly all Asia-Pacific states, with

five priority areas: disaster management, counterterrorism, maritime security, non-proliferation and disarmament, and information and communications technology. Finally, the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) specifically addresses maritime connectivity, SLOC safety and security, maritime search and rescue, maritime domain awareness, the protection of marine ecosystems and biodiversity, marine resources, and eco-tourism. These mechanisms operate through distinct but overlapping institutional mandates. Table 3 summarizes their respective membership and substantive areas of relevance to maritime security cooperation.

Table 3. ASEAN Sectoral Bodies Relevant to Maritime Security Cooperation

Body	Scope of Membership	Core Focus Relevant to This Study
ADMM / ADMM-Plus	ASEAN defense ministers; Plus includes 8 external dialogue partners	Defense-sector CBM (seminars, exercises); ADMM-Plus adds practical maritime security cooperation
AMMTC	ASEAN home affairs/law-enforcement ministers	Transnational crime, including piracy, directly
ARF	Nearly all Asia-Pacific states (widest membership)	Disaster management, counterterrorism, maritime security, non-proliferation, ICT
AMF	ASEAN member states (sectoral, maritime-focused)	SLOC safety, search and rescue, maritime domain awareness, connectivity

At the sub-regional level, the three littoral states have complemented this ASEAN framework through the TCA discussed above, which was specifically designed to prevent and suppress transnational crime in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea. These sectoral bodies represent an ASEAN effort to establish Confidence-Building Measures (CBMs) in maritime security cooperation, aiming to avoid open confrontation with any country (interview with the Directorate of ASEAN Political-Security Cooperation, Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Republic of Indonesia, 2019).

ASEAN Cooperative Security: An Analysis of the Five Principles

Drawing on the conceptual framework set out in the literature review, the five principles of cooperative security can be traced in ASEAN's cooperative practice in addressing the threat in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea, as follows.

Inclusivity of actor engagement

The fundamental principle of cooperative security emphasizes engaging both state and non-state actors to create stability without distinguishing between friend and foe, on the assumption that no single party can resolve maritime security threats unilaterally. In practice in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea, this principle remains limited: ASEAN prioritizes sovereignty, so management of this area occurs mostly on a bilateral and trilateral basis rather than through ASEAN's direct institutional involvement. External actors such as Japan and the United States have contributed by providing patrol vessels and training cooperation, though their involvement remains outside ASEAN's formal framework.

These limitations are clearly evident in the TCA negotiation process itself. The Philippines firmly maintained that "joint" patrols could only be conducted on the high seas, not within its own territorial waters. As a result, the IndoMalPhi Trilateral Maritime Patrol (TMP) ultimately took the form of coordinated national patrols within each country's waters, rather than a true joint operation (CIMSEC, 2016). Sovereignty concerns also shaped which external actors were permitted to participate. This was apparent when President Duterte proposed involving China in patrols in the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas in 2017; the idea garnered little domestic support, reflecting the reluctance of Philippine security authorities to grant operational access and a presence to extra-regional powers in the waters under surveillance (Storey, 2018).

Confidence-building measures (CBM) through dialogue

CBM efforts are realized through regular dialogue to align perceptions of regional maritime security, build trust, and avoid the potential for conflict. For instance, differing

perceptions of piracy and armed robbery have led Indonesia and Malaysia to refrain from ratifying ReCAAP. Meanwhile, 14 other Asian nations have joined (interview with Second Secretary, Directorate of ASEAN Political-Security Cooperation, 2019). As a regional institution, ASEAN seeks to create conditions conducive to sound maritime security cooperation in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea, assuming that stability in this area will contribute to Southeast Asia's overall maritime security as part of its APSC implementation.

Cooperative approach to dispute resolution

A cooperative approach is one of ASEAN's fundamental principles for resolving differences or disputes peacefully and effectively among its members (Interview with the Director of Operations of BAKAMLA). This principle bridges maritime security cooperation, reflected in both the trilateral TCA agreement and ASEAN's sectoral forums discussed above.

Comprehensive security

ASEAN recognizes that individual security underpins regional stability, assuming that insecurity among individuals and local communities ultimately affects state security. Individual security has become an important agenda item within ASEAN's cooperative maritime security framework, since protecting coastal communities in vulnerable areas such as the Sulu Sea supports their livelihoods — while also reducing the vulnerabilities that have long driven some communities toward illegal activity (see also the findings discussed below).

Indivisibility

The principle of indivisibility affirms that one state's security, or that of a group of states, cannot be separated from others' in the region, making joint effort necessary to pursue shared security interests. In ASEAN policy, this principle is reflected in adherence to norms of consultation and consensus-seeking in decision-making, as well as in coordinating regional maritime security policy. In practical terms, this is realized through a series of bilateral agreements among the Philippines, Indonesia, and Malaysia for joint naval exercises and coordinated naval patrols in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea, in which the level and nature of cooperation among states is a key factor determining the effectiveness of sea and air patrol outcomes.

These findings reinforce the relevance of the cooperative security concept in explaining how Southeast Asian states act to pursue shared interests, even as the inclusivity principle remains constrained by the strong influence of state sovereignty.

The preceding analysis points to two contributions that go beyond merely describing existing cooperation. First, it highlights an inclusivity gap, specifically a shift from genuine multilateral engagement to bilateral and trilateral arrangements whenever naval sovereignty is at stake. This suggests that the most promising path to deeper ASEAN institutional engagement lies not with navies, but with coast guard agencies, whose law-enforcement mandates are less politically sensitive than military ones. Coast guard cooperation therefore offers an additional institutional avenue to address shared maritime threats while remaining less politically sensitive than cooperation involving naval forces.

The coast guard's vital role is also evident when state-established maritime cooperation mechanisms have only limited authority within a nation's sovereign waters. A state holds sovereign rights over the area extending 12 nautical miles from its coast, known as the territorial sea. Beyond this zone, the focus shifts to law enforcement, a responsibility that falls to the coast guard (Interview with Head of Operations at BAKAMLA RI, 2019). Consequently, BAKAMLA RI supports establishing the ACGF to promote ASEAN centrality, particularly in addressing non-traditional maritime threats, issues of shared concern for nations across the region. These interview findings are corroborated by documentary evidence from other participating ASEAN member states (ASEAN, 2015; Manullang, 2023). The Philippine Department of Foreign Affairs documented the country's participation in the Expert Group Meeting on the ASEAN Maritime Forum–ASEAN Coast Guard Forum in August 2015, describing the meeting as part of efforts to strengthen the establishment and exchange of ASEAN norms regarding maritime security and safety. Similarly, the Malaysian Maritime Enforcement Agency (MMEA) recorded its participation in the Second Expert Group Meeting on the Establishment of the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum held in Manila in January 2018 (Sulistiawan, 2018). These records show that developing an ASEAN coast guard mechanism involved various ASEAN maritime authorities and was not solely an Indonesian institutional initiative. Institutionalizing this through the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) would enable ASEAN to build shared capacity where current arrangements are weakest, without requiring states to compromise the sovereign prerogatives they have steadfastly guarded. Second, the socioeconomic drivers previously identified (Kusen, 2020), such as a lack of transparency, poverty amidst abundant resources, and weak governance, are viewed in cooperative security literature as individual- and

community-level vulnerabilities that the concept of comprehensive security aims to address. However, the trilateral and ASEAN mechanisms discussed above are primarily focused on law enforcement and military action. Therefore, a social development approach in the Sulu Sea coastal region is not a departure from cooperative security but an underutilized extension of the comprehensive security principle, an integral element of the concept itself.

■ CONCLUSION

This article demonstrates that cooperative security has been applied by ASEAN in addressing the threat of piracy and armed robbery in the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea through two complementary levels of cooperation: trilateral sub-regional cooperation among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines (the TCA and TMP IndoMalPhi), and the broader ASEAN maritime security cooperation framework through sectoral bodies under the APSC (ADMM, ADMM-Plus, AMMTC, ARF, and AMF). This cooperative practice reflects the five principles of cooperative security: inclusivity, confidence-building measures, a cooperative approach, comprehensive security, and indivisibility. However, the inclusivity principle remains constrained by the strength of the state sovereignty principle, which means management of the Sulu–Sulawesi Sea area occurs mostly on a bilateral and trilateral basis rather than through ASEAN's institutional involvement.

These two levels of cooperation reflect not merely a coincidental situation but a consequence of the previously identified limitations on sovereignty. A response conducted entirely at the ASEAN level would require those institutions to assume operational roles within national territorial waters, something member states are unwilling to concede. In contrast, a purely trilateral response would deprive the coastal states involved of the sustained dialogue channels, information-sharing infrastructure, and precedents for coordinated action that the ADMM, AMMTC, ARF, and AMF provide. Trilateral cooperation provides the operational specificity needed to address shared criminal threats in specific maritime areas. At the same time, the ASEAN-level architecture provides the confidence-building framework that enables such trilateral arrangements to be negotiated and legitimized. Each level compensates for the other's shortcomings arising from these constraints. In this sense, the combination functions as an effective formula, not a mere coincidence of overlapping mechanisms.

This study offers two contributions to the discussion of regional maritime security, developed above from the five-principle analysis: the need to strengthen coast guard cooperation through the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACGF) as a middle path for enhancing joint capacity without touching on the sensitivities of naval sovereignty, and the importance of a social development approach in the coastal areas of the Sulu Sea to complement the law-enforcement and military approaches that have thus far predominated. Further research is recommended to empirically examine the ACGF's implementation since its establishment and to evaluate the impact of social development programs on reducing maritime crime rates in this tri-border area.

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