

Strategic Concept In Developing Asean Maritime Resilience For Regional Peace And Stability

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Abstract: The maritime domain of Southeast Asia is one of the most strategic regions in the world, characterized by its critical sea lanes, abundant resources, and complex security dynamics. The growing geopolitical rivalry, illegal activities at sea, and environmental challenges threaten ASEAN's maritime stability and undermine regional peace. This paper provides a strategic review of ASEAN's efforts in developing maritime resilience as a foundation for peace and stability. By employing a qualitative approach through literature review, policy analysis, and strategic assessment, this study identifies key drivers, challenges, and opportunities in strengthening ASEAN maritime resilience. The findings suggest that multilateral cooperation, integrated maritime domain awareness, and sustainable ocean governance are pivotal in addressing security and non-security threats. The paper concludes with policy recommendations to enhance ASEAN's role as a normative and cooperative platform in safeguarding maritime peace in the Indo-Pacific.

Keywords: Strategic Concept, ASEAN, Maritime Resilience, Regional Stability, Security, Indo-Pacific

1. INTRODUCTION

The maritime domain in Southeast Asia represents both opportunities and vulnerabilities. The South China Sea disputes, piracy in the Malacca Strait, and transnational crimes across the Sulu–Celebes Seas highlight the fragility of regional stability. As ASEAN envisions itself as the central actor in the Indo-Pacific architecture, maritime resilience becomes essential not only for national security but also for collective peace. This paper explores how ASEAN can develop maritime resilience to mitigate threats, balance major-power competition, and ensure sustainable regional stability (Ainun, 2025).

For ASEAN, the disputes present a profound challenge to regional stability and unity. While claimant states seek stronger resistance against China's assertiveness, non-claimant ASEAN members prefer neutrality to preserve economic relations with Beijing. This divergence complicates ASEAN's ability to present a unified stance in negotiations with China, particularly in the ongoing Code of Conduct (CoC) discussions. The geopolitical tension in the South China Sea not only threatens freedom of navigation and overflight but also exposes ASEAN to major-power rivalry, especially between the United States and China. As the U.S. strengthens its naval presence and conducts Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), the risk of miscalculation and escalation grows. Consequently, the South China Sea disputes are not merely bilateral or regional issues, but a strategic flashpoint with global implications (Bradford & Herrmann, 2021).

Smuggling activities—including the trafficking of narcotics, illegal fuel, weapons, and contraband goods—also exploit weak surveillance and governance in border areas. These illicit networks are often transnational in nature, involving organized crime syndicates that adapt quickly to enforcement measures. Human trafficking, particularly of migrants and vulnerable populations, remains another pressing concern, with maritime routes serving as critical corridors for irregular migration and exploitation (Anbumozhi, 2017).

Such transnational crimes undermine state sovereignty, erode public trust in maritime governance, and divert resources from broader regional security priorities. Moreover, they reveal the necessity for deeper intelligence-sharing, interoperability of maritime forces, and harmonized legal frameworks among ASEAN states. Addressing these crimes requires not only coordinated maritime law enforcement but also socio-economic strategies to reduce the conditions that allow such illicit activities to thrive (Bhattacharyya, 2010).

Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated (IUU) fishing is one of the most urgent maritime challenges in the region. It not only depletes fish stocks but also fuels economic losses estimated at billions of dollars annually. Perpetrated by both domestic and foreign fishing fleets, IUU fishing disrupts regional stability, sparks diplomatic tensions, and undermines the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that ASEAN countries are committed to achieving. Weak enforcement capacity, overlapping maritime claims, and corruption further complicate effective governance of fisheries (Caballero-Anthony & Emmers, 2022).

Marine pollution—caused by plastic waste, oil spills, and land-based sources—has reached alarming levels in ASEAN waters. Several Southeast Asian states are ranked among the world's largest contributors to marine plastic pollution, threatening marine biodiversity and public health. The cumulative effect of pollution reduces the resilience of marine ecosystems and damages industries such as tourism and fisheries, which are vital to ASEAN economies.

Addressing these environmental threats requires comprehensive cooperation in sustainable ocean governance, regional implementation of international frameworks such as the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the FAO Port State Measures Agreement, as well as investment in green technologies and community-based adaptation strategies. Without proactive measures, environmental degradation will increasingly intersect with geopolitical and economic challenges, thereby undermining maritime resilience in the region (Damayanti, 2017).

Such divergence complicates ASEAN's ability to speak with one voice, undermining the principle of ASEAN centrality in regional security architecture. Furthermore, external powers frequently attempt to influence ASEAN decision-making processes, leading to concerns about fragmentation and reduced effectiveness in addressing shared maritime challenges. If unmanaged, the U.S.–China rivalry could polarize ASEAN members and erode the organization's credibility as a neutral convener in the Indo-Pacific. Therefore, maintaining unity, strengthening intra-ASEAN cooperation, and reinforcing mechanisms like the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) are essential for preserving ASEAN's role amid intensifying great power competition (Cordner, 1994).

Research Questions are (1) What are the key challenges to ASEAN maritime resilience? (2) How has ASEAN responded to maritime security threats? (3) What strategic concepts and frameworks can strengthen ASEAN's maritime resilience for long-term stability?

2. MATERIALS AND METHODS

The concept of maritime resilience refers to the ability of states and regional institutions to withstand, adapt, and recover from disruptions in the maritime domain (Li, 2023). ASEAN's approach to maritime security is shaped by its principles of non-interference, consensus, and centrality (Putra et al., 2024). However, scholars such as Mansury (2024) argue that these principles limit ASEAN's collective action, especially in the South China Sea disputes.

Other studies emphasize the importance of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA), multilateral exercises, and regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) in enhancing cooperative security. Nevertheless, the gap between normative frameworks and operational implementation remains a significant challenge (Pattiradjawane & Soebagjo, 2015).

This study employs a qualitative descriptive approach based on:

- Literature review of academic journals, policy papers, and official ASEAN documents.
- Comparative analysis of ASEAN maritime cooperation mechanisms (Rosnani et al., 2022)

- Strategic review framework to assess resilience factors in maritime governance, security cooperation, and sustainability (Şahin, 2023).

The following Causal Loop Diagram illustrates the interrelationship of key factors influencing ASEAN Maritime Resilience. It shows how cooperation, capacity building, maritime domain awareness, and sustainable ocean governance interact with geopolitical stability and external power rivalry to impact regional peace and stability.

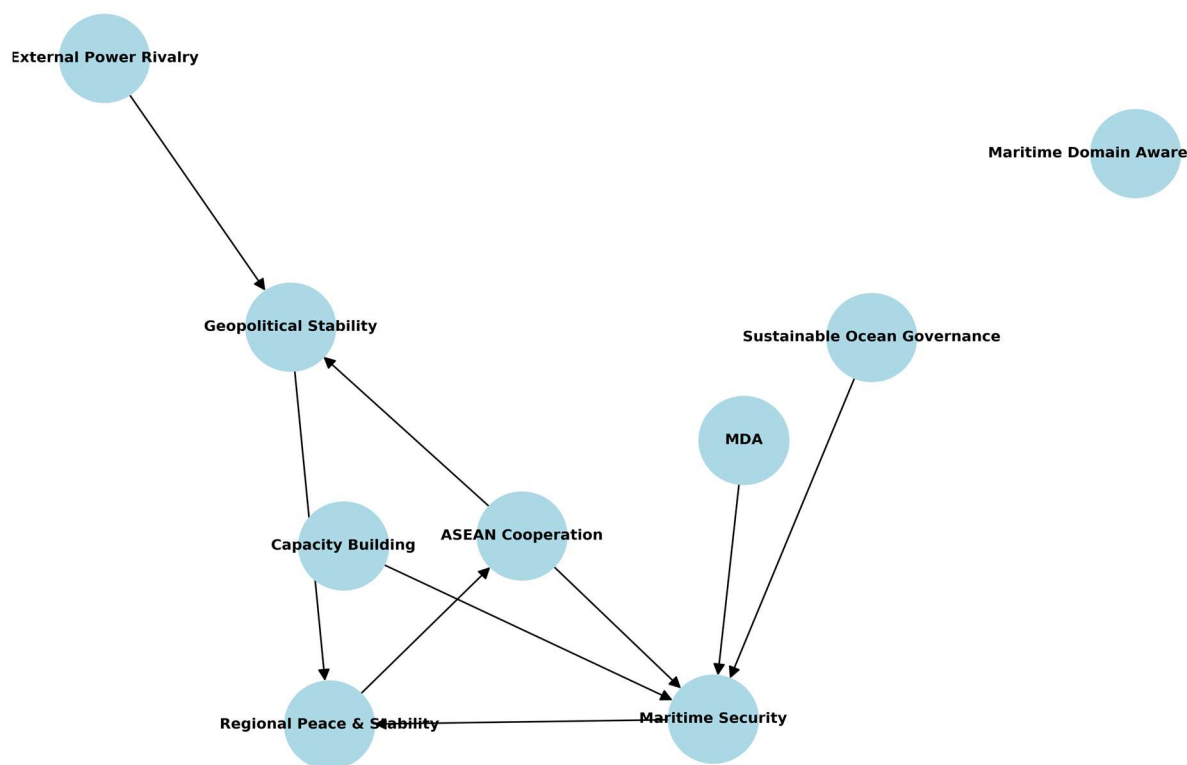


Figure 1. Causal Loop Diagram of ASEAN Maritime Resilience

The diagram demonstrates that Maritime Security is the cornerstone of ASEAN's maritime resilience, achieved through a multidimensional approach—strengthened cooperation, capacity building, geopolitical stability, sustainable ocean governance, and enhanced MDA. The diagram highlights Maritime Security as the central outcome, influenced by multiple factors:

- ASEAN cooperation
- Geopolitical stability
- Capacity building
- Sustainable ocean governance
- Maritime Domain Awareness

3. RESULT AND DISCUSSION

3.1. Key Maritime Challenges in ASEAN

- Geopolitical Tensions: South China Sea disputes involving China and several ASEAN members.

The South China Sea has long been regarded as one of the most contested maritime regions in the world due to its strategic importance and abundant resources. Several ASEAN member states—namely Vietnam, the Philippines, Malaysia, and Brunei—have overlapping territorial and maritime claims with China, particularly in relation to the Spratly Islands and the Paracel Islands. China asserts its claims based on the so-called “Nine-Dash Line,” which covers nearly 90 percent of the South China Sea. This claim directly overlaps with the Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZs) of several ASEAN countries as defined under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). Despite the 2016 ruling by the Permanent Court of Arbitration (PCA), which invalidated China’s expansive claims, Beijing continues to reject the decision and reinforce its presence through militarization of artificial islands, deployment of coast guard vessels, and increased maritime patrols (Voingpuhakdy, 2023).

- Transnational Crimes: Piracy, armed robbery, smuggling, and human trafficking.

Transnational crimes at sea remain a persistent threat to maritime security in Southeast Asia, particularly in critical waterways such as the Strait of Malacca, the Sulu-Sulawesi Seas, and the South China Sea. Piracy and armed robbery against ships disrupt commercial shipping routes, inflict economic losses, and endanger the safety of seafarers. Despite improvements in regional patrols and coordinated mechanisms such as the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) and the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), incidents continue to occur due to porous maritime boundaries and limited enforcement capacity (Rosnani et al., 2022).

- Environmental Threats: Climate change, IUU (Illegal, Unreported, and Unregulated) fishing, and marine pollution.

Environmental threats represent a critical dimension of maritime security in Southeast Asia, as the region’s prosperity is deeply dependent on ocean health and sustainable marine resources. Climate change exacerbates coastal vulnerability through sea-level rise, intensified storms, and ocean acidification, threatening millions of livelihoods in low-lying coastal and island communities. The degradation of coral reefs and mangrove ecosystems further undermines natural resilience against disasters and erodes food security (Wanta, 2023).

- Great Power Competition: Rivalry between the U.S. and China affecting ASEAN unity.

The intensifying rivalry between the United States and China has become a defining feature of the strategic landscape in the Indo-Pacific, with profound implications for ASEAN’s cohesion and maritime resilience. China seeks to expand its influence through its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), growing naval presence, and assertive actions in the South China Sea. At the same time, the United States reinforces its regional role by strengthening alliances with Japan, Australia, and the Philippines, expanding Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs), and promoting the Indo-Pacific Strategy that emphasizes a “free and open” maritime order.

This great power competition places ASEAN in a delicate position. While many member states rely on China for trade, investment, and economic growth, they also value U.S. security commitments as a counterbalance to China’s assertiveness. The resulting strategic dilemma often exposes divisions within ASEAN: claimant states in the South China Sea tend to support stronger U.S. engagement, while non-claimant states may prefer neutrality to avoid jeopardizing their economic ties with Beijing (Şahin, 2023).

3.2. ASEAN’s Current Responses to Maritime Security Threats

- ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) & Expanded AMF: Platforms for dialogue and cooperation.

The ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), established in 2010, was designed as a dedicated platform for dialogue among ASEAN member states to address maritime security, safety, and environmental issues. The AMF provides a venue for fostering trust, sharing best practices, and promoting policy coordination on maritime governance. It aims to complement existing ASEAN

mechanisms by focusing specifically on cross-sectoral maritime concerns that span defense, economy, environment, and law enforcement.

Recognizing the interconnected nature of maritime challenges, ASEAN later expanded this platform into the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) in 2012, which includes external partners such as the United States, China, Japan, India, Australia, and the European Union. The EAMF serves as an inclusive dialogue mechanism to strengthen maritime cooperation, enhance transparency, and mitigate risks of miscalculation among major powers operating in ASEAN waters.

Together, the AMF and EAMF provide critical venues for confidence-building and cooperative security. They enable ASEAN to assert its centrality by convening both regional and external stakeholders to address issues ranging from the South China Sea disputes, maritime domain awareness (MDA), and transnational crimes, to environmental protection and sustainable fisheries management. However, their effectiveness has been limited by the absence of binding decisions, slow progress in translating dialogue into practical cooperation, and occasional political divisions among ASEAN members.

Despite these challenges, the AMF and EAMF remain essential to advancing ASEAN's vision of a rules-based maritime order. By strengthening their institutional capacity and linking discussions to actionable frameworks—such as the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP)—these forums can evolve from being primarily consultative platforms into mechanisms that deliver tangible contributions to regional maritime resilience and peace.

- ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF): Security cooperation with external partners.

The ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), established in 1994, is one of the most significant multilateral security platforms in the Asia-Pacific. Bringing together 27 participants—including ASEAN member states, major powers such as the United States, China, Russia, Japan, and the European Union—the ARF serves as a critical mechanism for dialogue, confidence-building, and preventive diplomacy. Its broad membership makes it an indispensable platform for managing security challenges that extend beyond ASEAN's immediate region.

In the maritime domain, the ARF plays a key role in promoting cooperative approaches to issues such as freedom of navigation, counter-piracy operations, humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR), and combating transnational crimes. Through workshops, joint exercises, and capacity-building initiatives, the ARF helps strengthen maritime domain awareness (MDA), enhance interoperability among regional forces, and improve coordination in responding to non-traditional security threats.

For ASEAN, the ARF is also a means of asserting its “centrality” by convening major powers in an inclusive framework where rules-based dialogue is emphasized over unilateral action. This is particularly valuable in managing tensions in the South China Sea, where the ARF provides a neutral platform for both claimant and non-claimant states, as well as external stakeholders, to engage constructively.

However, the ARF's effectiveness is often constrained by its consensus-based decision-making, which can slow progress on sensitive security issues. While it has succeeded in fostering dialogue and transparency, translating these into binding agreements or collective action remains a challenge.

Despite these limitations, the ARF continues to be a cornerstone of ASEAN's multilateral security architecture. Engaging external partners within a cooperative framework enhances ASEAN's ability to address complex maritime security challenges while reducing the risks of great power rivalry escalating into open conflict.

- AOIP: Normative framework aligning with freedom of navigation and sustainable development.

The ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP), adopted in 2019, represents ASEAN's strategic vision for engaging with the wider Indo-Pacific region amid intensifying geopolitical competition. Unlike other Indo-Pacific strategies promoted by major powers, the AOIP emphasizes inclusivity, dialogue, and cooperation rather than confrontation. It reaffirms ASEAN centrality and unity as the foundation for maintaining regional peace and stability. From a maritime perspective, the AOIP highlights freedom of navigation and overflight as fundamental principles in accordance with international law, particularly the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS). This reflects ASEAN's commitment to a rules-based maritime order that safeguards

sea lines of communication (SLOCs), ensures open access to global commons, and prevents unilateral actions that could destabilize the region.

Beyond security, the AOIP also integrates sustainable development into its framework. It underscores cooperation in areas such as marine environmental protection, the blue economy, disaster resilience, and sustainable fisheries management. By linking maritime security with economic and environmental dimensions, the AOIP advances a comprehensive approach to resilience that aligns with the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

While the AOIP has been welcomed as a normative framework, its effectiveness depends on ASEAN's ability to translate its principles into concrete actions and partnerships. Initiatives such as enhancing maritime domain awareness (MDA), promoting joint research on marine sustainability, and fostering connectivity projects across the Indo-Pacific are potential pathways to operationalize the AOIP.

Ultimately, the AOIP provides ASEAN with a diplomatic tool to navigate great power competition, maintain strategic autonomy, and project a vision of an open, stable, and sustainable maritime order in the Indo-Pacific.

- Joint Patrols and MDA Initiatives: Examples include Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) and trilateral patrols in the Sulu-Celebes Seas.

Joint patrols and maritime domain awareness (MDA) initiatives are practical measures that strengthen ASEAN's collective ability to safeguard strategic waterways against piracy, armed robbery, and transnational crimes. Among the most notable examples are the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) in the Sulu-Celebes Seas.

The Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP), launched in 2004, is a cooperative security mechanism involving Indonesia, Malaysia, Singapore, and, later joined by Thailand. It combines coordinated sea patrols, the "Eyes in the Sky" aerial surveillance initiative, and intelligence-sharing frameworks to secure one of the world's busiest shipping lanes. The MSP has been widely credited with significantly reducing incidents of piracy and armed robbery in the Malacca Strait, demonstrating the effectiveness of regional collaboration in enhancing maritime security.

Similarly, the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) was initiated in 2016 by Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines to counter piracy, sea robbery, and terrorism in the Sulu-Celebes Seas, an area historically plagued by kidnappings and attacks carried out by militant groups. The TCA includes coordinated patrols, the establishment of maritime command centers, and mechanisms for real-time information sharing. By improving response times and closing gaps in surveillance, the TCA has contributed to a noticeable decline in maritime crime in the region.

Both initiatives underscore the importance of MDA as a foundation for effective maritime governance. By pooling resources, sharing intelligence, and enhancing interoperability, these patrols not only reduce immediate security threats but also build trust and habits of cooperation among ASEAN member states. However, challenges remain, including resource disparities, jurisdictional limitations, and the need for greater inclusion of external partners to address transnational networks that operate beyond regional waters.

Nevertheless, the MSP and TCA illustrate how joint patrols and MDA initiatives can serve as models of cooperative security, reinforcing ASEAN's maritime resilience and contributing to the stability of the broader Indo-Pacific region.

3.3. Strategic Concept for Developing ASEAN Maritime Resilience

Building maritime resilience in the ASEAN region requires a comprehensive, multi-dimensional strategy that addresses both traditional and non-traditional security challenges. Strategic pathways must balance sovereignty concerns, regional cooperation, and engagement with external partners to ensure long-term peace and stability in the Indo-Pacific.

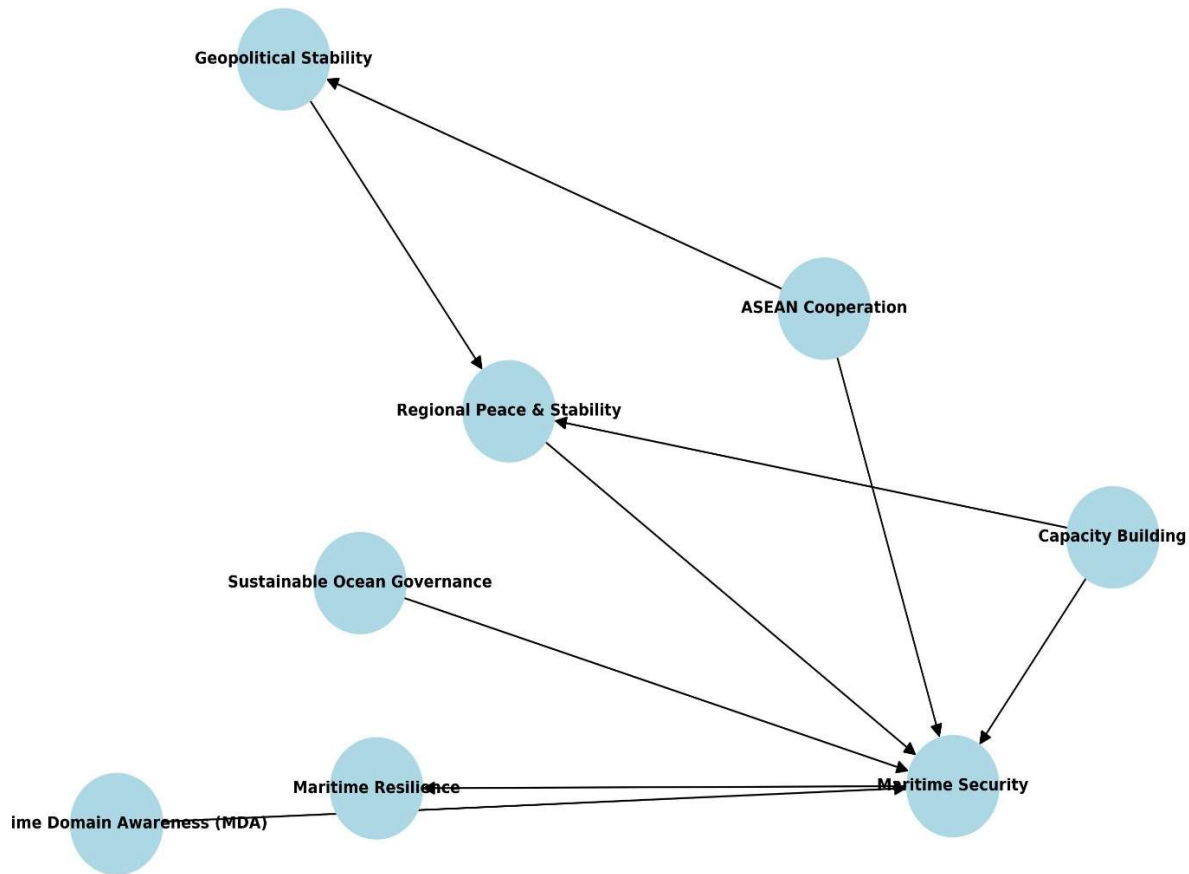


Figure 2. Diagram of Strategic Concept for Building ASEAN Maritime Resilience

Based on Figure 2. Diagram of Strategic Concept for Building ASEAN Maritime Resilience, ASEAN Cooperation enhances Geopolitical Stability and directly supports Maritime Security. Capacity Building strengthens both Maritime Security and Regional Peace & Stability. Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and Sustainable Ocean Governance directly contribute to Maritime Security. Geopolitical Stability reinforces Regional Peace & Stability, which in turn sustains Maritime Security. Ultimately, strong Maritime Security leads to Maritime Resilience, ensuring ASEAN's ability to withstand challenges from great power rivalry, transnational crimes, and environmental threats.

a. Strengthening Regional Cooperation and ASEAN Centrality

ASEAN must continue to uphold its centrality in regional maritime governance by enhancing the effectiveness of existing mechanisms such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), the Expanded AMF, and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF). Deeper institutional coordination is needed to avoid duplication of efforts and to project ASEAN as a credible convener capable of balancing great power competition.

b. Enhancing Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) and Joint Operations

Improving information-sharing systems, surveillance technologies, and coordinated patrols is essential to counter piracy, smuggling, and other transnational threats. Expanding successful models such as the Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) and the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) can serve as blueprints for other vulnerable maritime zones.

c. Developing Legal and Normative Frameworks

ASEAN should reinforce adherence to international law, especially UNCLOS, and promote the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) as a normative guide. A unified legal and political framework strengthens freedom of navigation, safeguards sea lines of communication (SLOCs), and enhances ASEAN's credibility in conflict resolution.

d. Integrating Sustainable Development and Blue Economy Initiatives

Maritime resilience is inseparable from sustainability. ASEAN needs to advance cooperative efforts in addressing climate change, preventing marine pollution, and combating IUU fishing. Investments in the blue economy—such as renewable energy, sustainable fisheries, and eco-tourism—can enhance resilience while supporting economic growth.

e. Building Capacity and Interoperability

Differences in capabilities among ASEAN member states create gaps in enforcement and coordination. Capacity-building programs, supported by external partners, can enhance training, technology adoption, and interoperability of maritime forces. Shared platforms for exercises, simulation, and crisis management are critical to ensure effective collective responses.

f. Promoting Confidence-Building and Preventive Diplomacy

Given the risks of miscalculation in contested waters such as the South China Sea, ASEAN should expand confidence-building measures, codes of conduct, and preventive diplomacy mechanisms. These tools reduce tensions, encourage transparency, and prevent disputes from escalating into open conflict.

g. Leveraging Multistakeholder Engagement

Maritime resilience is not only the responsibility of states. Partnerships with the private sector, academia, civil society, and local communities are crucial in advancing maritime governance, technological innovation, and sustainable development. In sum, ASEAN's strategic pathways for maritime resilience must integrate security, economic, environmental, and diplomatic dimensions into a coherent framework. By doing so, ASEAN can not only safeguard its waters but also reinforce its role as a stabilizing force in the wider Indo-Pacific.

4. CONCLUSION

ASEAN's maritime resilience is critical to ensuring peace and stability in Southeast Asia and the broader Indo-Pacific. While ASEAN has developed several cooperative mechanisms, gaps in enforcement, capacity, and unity limit its effectiveness. Strengthening maritime resilience requires a comprehensive strategy that integrates security, governance, and sustainability. By advancing regional cooperation, enhancing maritime domain awareness, and promoting sustainable practices, ASEAN can safeguard its maritime domain and reinforce its role as a stabilizing force in the Indo-Pacific.

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