



e-ISSN: 3109-6425  
p-ISSN: 3109-6433

## Proceeding Jakarta Geopolitical Forum

Lembaga Ketahanan Nasional Republik Indonesia (LEMHANNAS RI)

Volume 8 | 2024

WEB : <https://proceeding.lemhannas.com/index.php/jgf>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.55960/jgf.v8i1.269>

### Conference Paper

## ASEAN'S PERSPECTIVE ON MARITIME WHOLE OF GOVERNMENT APPROACH IN THE REGION

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### Abstract.

Southeast Asia's maritime domain is one of the key drivers in global trade, regional stability, and environmental sustainability. This study investigates the governance mechanisms and institutional coordination efforts within ASEAN aimed at tackling persistent and emerging maritime challenges. Using a qualitative content analysis of regional policy documents, institutional reports, and academic literature, the research highlights the necessity of adopting both "Whole-of-Government" and "Whole-of-Community" approaches. National-level integration across agencies remains essential for tackling issues for example IUU fishing and people smuggling, while ASEAN's regional frameworks demand effective cross-pillar collaboration to respond to transnational threats, environmental degradation, and geopolitical tensions. Key institutional mechanisms, comprising the ASEAN Maritime Outlook and ASEAN Maritime Forum, demonstrate growing efforts to foster policy coherence and multilateral cooperation. The findings underscore ASEAN's evolving role in maritime governance and the need to reinforce inclusive, coordinated, and resilient frameworks to ensure long-term peace, stability, and prosperity in the region.

**Keywords:** ASEAN, Indo-Pacific, maritime governance, maritime security, Whole-of-Government.

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#### Article History:

Received : 18-04-2024  
Revised : 26-05-2024  
Accepted : 28-06-2024

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Published by Lemhannas Press.

## Introduction

Southeast Asia's maritime region holds strategic importance as a space where economic growth, environmental sustainability, and security converge (1). With maritime waters covering 66% of the region, the area functions as a vital junction between the Pacific and Indian Oceans (2). This maritime zone hosts key global trade routes, supports rich biodiversity, and sustains a dynamic economy driven by shipping, tourism, hydrocarbons, and fisheries (1). The region's deep integration into the global economy rests on these natural maritime advantages, which form a critical foundation for development and long-term prosperity.

## Literature Review

### Theoretical Studies

A "Whole-of-Government" approach becomes essential at the national level to effectively mitigate complex maritime challenges (3). This approach requires effective collaboration across ASEAN's three pillars, Political-Security, Economic, and Socio-Cultural, and the active engagement of 15 sectoral bodies (2). This approach requires active collaboration across various state agencies to produce coherent and coordinated responses. In the case of people smuggling in maritime zones, effective intervention depends on the joint efforts of law enforcement bodies, port authorities, and coast guards (4). Likewise, efforts to combat illegal, unreported, and unregulated (IUU) fishing necessitate close coordination between fisheries agencies and maritime security forces (4). Through the integrated governance, states can enhance operational capacity and policy coherence in safeguarding maritime interests.

### Empirical Studies

The regional maritime domain in Southeast Asia continues to face significant and persistent challenges (1,5). Transnational maritime crime, piracy, environmental degradation, for example marine plastic pollution, and illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing remain widespread. Unresolved maritime and territorial disputes, particularly in the South China Sea, involve overlapping claims between China and multiple ASEAN member states, increasing the risk of geopolitical escalation and regional instability. These tensions are further compounded by climate change, rising sea levels, typhoons, and intensifying strategic competition, making the maritime space a zone of both economic opportunity and strategic vulnerability (6).

Empirical conditions in the region reveal the deeply interwoven nature of environmental, economic, and geopolitical maritime issues (7). These intersections shape Southeast Asia's position as a critical arena in global and regional affairs, directly

affecting peace, security, sustainability, and development. However, the complex governance architecture, marked by specialised agencies operating under fragmented mandates, frequently impedes coordinated responses (8). As a result, efforts to manage the maritime domain remain challenged by institutional silos, despite the growing urgency for integrated, cross-sectoral approaches.

## Methods

The study adopts a qualitative content analysis approach, understood as a systematic method for deriving replicable and valid inferences from textual data (9,10). The approach enables an in-depth examination of regional maritime governance frameworks and institutional mechanisms within ASEAN, particularly concerning cross-pillar coordination and multilateral cooperation. The data sources comprise of ASEAN policy documents, official statements, institutional reports, and peer-reviewed academic literature published over the past ten years. The selection criteria prioritize materials relevant to maritime security, regional cooperation, blue economy development, and ASEAN-led mechanisms for example the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) and ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF). The unit of analysis focuses on institutional practices and policy instruments that support or hinder integrated maritime governance within ASEAN. The research was conducted over a one-year period, with data credibility ensured through document triangulation and comparison with expert analyses from regional maritime and policy studies.

## Results and Discussion

The implementation of strategic initiatives, for example the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) and the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), has enhanced regional maritime governance (11,12). The AMO, introduced during Indonesia's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2023, provides a framework for assessing existing efforts, identifying governance gaps, and offering recommendations to improve coordination across sectoral bodies. Meanwhile, the AMF has functioned as a vital platform for sharing best practices and promoting synergy among ASEAN actors, contributing to a more holistic and integrated maritime policy landscape.

Engagement with external partners further strengthens ASEAN's regional maritime approach. Cooperation through ASEAN-led mechanisms, comprise of the East Asia Summit (EAS), ASEAN Plus Three (APT), ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF), ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM)-Plus, and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), demonstrates sustained commitment to inclusive maritime dialogue and collaboration (2). Despite growing strategic competition in the Indo-Pacific, these platforms continue to support practical cooperation and reinforce

ASEAN's central role in maintaining regional peace and stability.

## Conclusion

Southeast Asia's maritime challenges require integrated responses at both national and regional levels. A "Whole-of-Government" approach enhances coordination among domestic agencies, while a "Whole-of-Community" strategy within ASEAN promotes cross-pillar collaboration to tackle complex issues like piracy, marine pollution, and geopolitical tensions. Initiatives, for example the ASEAN Maritime Outlook and ASEAN Maritime Forum, support this integration by guiding governance and fostering best practices. Continued engagement with external partners through ASEAN-led mechanisms further strengthens regional stability. To safeguard peace, security, and economic prosperity, ASEAN must sustain a unified, inclusive, and proactive maritime governance framework.

## Acknowledgments

The author extends sincere gratitude to The Association of Southeast Asian Nations and Lembaga Ketahanan Republik Indonesia for their invaluable support throughout the various stages of developing this article

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