

Strengthening Maritime Security Through the Defence Diplomacy: A Case Study of Malaysia-Indonesia Naval Cooperation Within the ASEAN Framework

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ABSTRACT

Malaysia and Indonesia have high-stakes situations with maritime security due to the strategic position of the Straits of Malacca and Sulawesi Sea. High-level defence diplomacy is critical for regional stability, even more so because both countries have shared threats such as piracy, smuggling, and illegal fishing. This article assesses Malaysia-Indonesia maritime cooperation, especially joint naval exercises, intelligence sharing, and diplomatic initiatives within the ASEAN context. Using a qualitative approach, we conducted six key informant in-depth interviews with senior military officers, policymakers, and security analysts from both Malaysia and Indonesia. Thereby, the study digs into the stakeholders' perceptions of defence diplomacy, defence cooperation, and defence diplomacy's benefit. The academic material believes that bilateral agreements, joint patrols, and coordinated naval exercises like MALINDO JAYA and MALINDO Patrols have enhanced interoperability, maritime threat management, and cross-border trust. However, there are challenges such as cybersecurity risks, inefficiencies in communication, and disparity in resources. While naval diplomacy has strengthened both bilateral defence relations and ASEAN security

integration, further modernisation efforts in technology, improvements in intelligence-sharing mechanisms, and the conduction of trilateral and multilateral exercises are required. These enhanced efforts will ensure sustainable maritime security and stability in the longer term in the Southeast Asian region.

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INTRODUCTION

Maritime security remains a critical challenge facing Southeast Asia, particularly for Malaysia and Indonesia which are located along key shipping lanes such as the Straits of Malacca and Sulawesi Sea (Marliani, 2024). These routes are important trade routes, but are also subject to piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, and territorial disputes (Guan, 2022). Given their geographical proximity and common security interests, Lubis (2022) agrees that defence diplomacy also plays an essential role in countering these threats through joint naval drills, intelligence sharing, and multilateral cooperation under the auspices of ASEAN.

The ASEAN platform enables regional security cooperation, especially through the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) and ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM-Plus) process (Kaewkamol & Klaisringoen, 2019). However, challenges remain in the naval asset modernisation, efficiency of information-sharing, and maritime security policy alignment.

This study explores the role of naval diplomacy in strengthening both the bilateral and ASEAN security relations, as well as examining the defence implications of joint maritime exercises and intelligence sharing for regional security.

PROBLEM STATEMENT

Maritime security in Southeast Asia has become an escalating cause of concern, as its waters constitute nearly 24% of the global trade (Fathun, 2019). Furthermore, the region is under the harshness of piracy, smuggling, illegal fishing, and territorial disputes exacerbated by geopolitical tensions in the South China Sea (Khanisa & Farhana, 2022). As key maritime states, the importance of defence diplomacy and naval cooperation to corral such challenges and preserving regional stability would not elude Malaysia and Indonesia.

Despite several bilateral agreements, coordinated patrols and joint naval exercises, there are significant gaps in the Malaysia-Indonesia maritime security cooperation. Intelligence-sharing mechanisms remain inconsistent, hindering situational awareness and responsiveness. There is an operational inequity due to a technological inequivalent in both naval assets and their communications systems. Across the globe, cybersecurity vulnerabilities put security operations at risk. While ASEAN facilitates regional collaboration, the lack of standardised policies and national interest prioritisation hinders a fully integrated defence strategy.

Therefore, this study aims to examine the effectiveness of the Malaysia-Indonesia defence diplomacy in addressing maritime threats. It seeks to identify gaps in intelligence sharing, operational coordination, and regional defence integration while providing policy recommendations to strengthen the maritime security cooperation between the two nations.

RESEARCH QUESTIONS

This study seeks to answer the following:

1. What is the current state of the Malaysia-Indonesia maritime security cooperation?
2. How effective are joint naval exercises and intelligence-sharing efforts in addressing the maritime threats?
3. What role does the naval diplomacy play in strengthening the bilateral and ASEAN defence relations?
4. What improvements can be made to enhance the maritime security cooperation?

FINDINGS

Malaysia and Indonesia maintain robust defence cooperation through bilateral agreements, coordinated patrols, and intelligence-sharing mechanisms to secure their shared waters, particularly in the Straits of Malacca and Sulawesi Sea. These regions are vital for international trade and regional stability. The 1969 Treaty of Jakarta serves as the legal foundation for maritime collaboration, while operational frameworks like Malacca Strait Patrols (MSP) and MALINDO Patrols help reduce piracy and ensure safer shipping lanes.

Interoperability, Cooperation, Operational Readiness, and Humanitarian Response through the Joint Naval Exercise such as MALINDO JAYA and KOMODO Exercise have improved. These exercises improve coordination in responding to security threats, conducting search and rescue missions, and enforcing maritime law. However, barriers like resource constraints, communication silos, and cybersecurity risks hinder the ability to maximise these efforts.

The strengthening of military cooperation has enhanced maritime battle preparedness, confidence-building, and regional strategic combination between the two nations, particularly in border policies in the event of a conflict. The joint exercises aim to help develop operational synergy and enhance the capability of countering piracy and smuggling and management of other maritime threats. Enhanced situational awareness through real-time sharing of intelligence helped to counter maritime crime in the Malacca Strait and Sulawesi Sea, securing safer trading pathways.

These successes notwithstanding, incompatibilities between communication systems lead to delayed responses, while cybersecurity vulnerabilities threaten leaks of intelligence. Poor information-sharing infrastructure degrades maritime domain awareness. Standardised processes through the MALINDO JAYA have facilitated inter-agency coordination to some extent, but the measures still need to ensure better protection of sensitive intelligence.

The Naval diplomacy is also important in enhancing bilateral defence relations and promoting the ASEAN-wide security integration. Constant interaction and policy coordination help ease the maritime tensions, making sure disagreements are resolved

through dialogue, not conflict. The cooperation encourages the ASEAN framework on defence, especially ADMM Plus, and promotes the interests of defence in the region.

The joint naval training and military exercises also improve crisis response mechanisms, making both navies better prepared to meet emerging threats like piracy, illegal fishing, and human trafficking. That said, the overarching challenge remains how to balance national interests with regional security goals, particularly in the face of military capability disparities. These issues need to be overcome for a more cohesive framework of the regional security.

The joint patrols with Singapore and the Philippines should also be expanded to address transnational crime in maritime spaces such as piracy and smuggling. Real-time threat detection and situational awareness can achieve more effective outcomes if intelligence-sharing platforms are integrated, for example, the Singapore's Information Fusion Centre (IFC).

Such frameworks of the ASEAN maritime security agreements can provide a more codified and therefore systematic way of regional cooperation with regards to contentious maritime issues such as territorial disputes and anti-piracy operations. Communication systems must be improved to reduce the time between intelligence detection and sharing, and multilateral joint exercises should be increased to improve regional interoperability.

Beyond the provision of security, the naval diplomacy can be used for humanitarian assistance and disaster relief (HADR) missions, strengthening countries in disaster response and medical assistance. This will result in strengthening the legal frameworks to stimulate the ASEAN members' formal obedience towards UNCLOS (United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea) and international maritime law, as well as the use of the ASEAN mediation committees to resolve maritime disputes peacefully.

CONCLUSION

Particularly, the Malaysia-Indonesia maritime security cooperation has effectively combatted piracy, along with improving intelligence-sharing and naval interoperability. But technical challenges, cybersecurity threats, and policy misalignments persist. Adopting measures such as strengthening joint patrols, intelligence-sharing, and ASEAN-led defence diplomacy is key for sustainable security in the region.

With the incorporation of this article and the need to improve further, Malaysia and Indonesia will be in a key position of collective defence diplomacy that will ensure a cohesive, resilient maritime Southeast Asia system. With concerted cooperation, technology transfer, and political diplomacy, both countries can become a model for maritime security governance within ASEAN.

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