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Maritime Security: Emerging Challenges and Their Implications for ASEAN¹

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Amid an intensifying geopolitical competition, challenges to ASEAN in its maritime domain loom large. Connecting between the Indian and Pacific Oceans, the region is one of the most strategic maritime spaces in the world in terms of global trade, food and energy security and marine biodiversity as it contains the major sea lines of communication (SLOC), namely the Malacca, Singapore, and Lombok Straits and the South China Sea. For example, the Malacca Strait is a global maritime chokepoint, where approximately 90,000 ships pass through every year. According to Kaewkamol Pitakdumrongkit, Assistant Professor and Head of the Centre for Multilateralism Studies at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), the Indo-

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Pacific region is home of 60% of global maritime trade, 60% of global GDP and 3,000 marine species.

The first edition of *ASEAN Maritime Outlook*, released in August 2023, stated that the maritime landscape of ASEAN has become more complex, multidimensional and interconnected. The report referred to a plethora of traditional and non-traditional maritime security issues, such as Illegal, Unreported and Unregulated (IUU) Fishing. ASEAN has stakes in global fishery production, which significantly contributes to economic development in the region. However, many fishing grounds are at medium to high risk due to overfishing and destructive fishing practices.

Although the region has been peaceful without major maritime conflict with military operation, there are diverse emerging challenges that should be highlighted.

First, ongoing geopolitical conflicts could trigger congestion in maritime transport and trade route. A recent news report reveals that the developments around the Red Sea early in 2024 caused an exponential increase in traffic at the Singapore Port. Some 44 containers had to wait for four days off the city-state in May. An immediate effect of this phenomenon led to a consideration for another plan to reroute the transportation by various shipping companies as well as manufacturers that could affect freights and generate risks, with a greater impact on possible increase in commodities prices.

Second, incident of piracy and arms robbery against ships have increased. The statistics from the Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia Information Sharing Centre (ReCAAP ISC) pointed out that there were 100 incidents in 2023. The number has increased compared to the year 2022. Most of the occurrences involved 1-3 unarmed perpetrators who left before the official investigation at the vessel. For the first half of the

year 2024 (January 4-June 27), 50 cases were reported. There is a tendency that the frequency and severity will increase. It will have a significant impact on maritime safety.

Third, freedom of navigation and innocent passage could be affected. Given the circumstances of ongoing conflicts in various areas around the world, there is a possibility that any state may take unilateral action to enforce its rules or regulations at sea that are not accepted by others. An early warning case is the South China Sea as there are three intertwining issues: access to oceanic energy resources, territorial disputes as well as buildup of naval military power and artificial islands. Given that the Indo-Pacific is a region with key maritime trade routes and 9 of 10 busiest ports in the world, any conflicts – small or large – would inevitably affect regional peace and prosperity.

An additional maritime security issue at which ASEAN should take a closer look is cyberattacks against ships and port facilities. According to the *ASEAN Maritime Outlook*, the main targets of these activities include ports' equipments, shore-side corporate networks and vessels' operation system.

Maritime security also has an environmental dimension. Threats to the region's depleting fish stocks are on the rise with marine debris being one of the most vexing factors affecting its sustainability. The volume of solid waste and marine debris generated across the ASEAN region has rapidly increased in recent years, with the region having some of the largest plastic waste generators. To address the issue, ASEAN countries adopted the Bangkok Declaration on Combating Marine Debris in the ASEAN Region and ASEAN Framework of Action on Marine Debris during Thailand's ASEAN Chairmanship in 2019.

Another example of an environmental incident that affects maritime security is oil spill. On June 14, beaches around Singapore had to be closed due to the crash of two vessels at Pasir Panjang

Terminal in Singapore, causing an enormous oil spill along the coastline. The efforts made by ASEAN member countries to tackle the issue have already existed. There are the memorandum of understanding on ASEAN Cooperation Mechanism for Joint Oil Spill Preparedness and Response signed by ASEAN Transport Ministers in Mandalay in 2014 and ASEAN Regional Oil Spill Contingency Plan adopted in 2018 in Bangkok.

Within these evolving areas of cooperation and emerging issues, the implementation of the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) remains one of the most relevant frameworks of ASEAN's engagement with external partners on maritime cooperation. The problems required collaborative efforts to safeguard the peaceful maritime domain from geo-political tensions, maritime territorial disputes and non-traditional maritime threats.

Minilateralism could be considered a strategic option. For example, Thailand has been working closely with Malaysia, Indonesia and Singapore, to conduct the Malacca Strait Patrol to prevent piracy and armed robbery against ships, which could disrupt the SLOCs and tackle other maritime crimes in the Straits of Malacca and Singapore.

Existing ASEAN regional frameworks such as the ASEAN Regional Forum Inter-sessional Meeting on Maritime Security and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF) may provide platforms for exchanging views and solutions. They could pave way for closer and more substantive cooperation on maritime security issues such as Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) to address maritime threats in the region and Maritime Spatial Planning (MSP) to promote effective and sustainable use of maritime domain in the future. Moreover, rigorous implementation of agreed measures through various frameworks should be considered.

Maritime domain is vital to peace and prosperity in the region. A secure, predictable and rules-based maritime order in ASEAN is always desirable for member countries and their stakeholders.

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