

Opportunities for Air Forces to address maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific

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Introduction

The ASEAN-Australia Maritime Security Research Program investigates how ASEAN military forces can address maritime security challenges in the Indo-Pacific region, with ASEAN at its centre. While navies have traditionally led maritime security efforts, many contemporary challenges require contributions from multiple domains. Air forces already provide capabilities such as surveillance, mobility, command and control, and strike that are essential to maritime operations. As militaries increasingly pursue multi-domain approaches, opportunities for air forces to contribute to maritime security are likely to expand.

It is not only multi-domain approaches that will improve regional success against future maritime security challenges, but also multinational approaches. Incorporating multi-domain and multinational approaches will magnify the success of any maritime security endeavour.

Maritime Security Challenges

ASEAN astutely identifies that “In recent times, however, the challenges that have emerged in ASEAN’s maritime domain have become more complex, multi-dimensional and interconnected” (ASEAN Secretariat, 2023). Consequently, if nations are going to address their maritime security challenges, the greatest benefit will come when their capabilities are drawn together with those of other nations. This is because the maritime domain is predominantly the space between nations within the “*mare liberum*” – the sea that is open to all nations. Kennedy & de Sousa (2023, p. 1) provide an insightful definition of maritime security because it describes a *continuum* that interconnects countries, cultures, politics, economics, trade, environmental issues, knowledge, and power throughout the planet. This concept of interconnection is highly relevant because most maritime security problems exist in the open waters between national boundaries.

Maritime security threats manifest across a broad range of interests. These interests range from traditional state-on-state regional security tensions, to transnational threats such as piracy and overfishing, and to environmental and human security threats such as increased natural disasters, pollution and climate change. In the Indo-Pacific region, maritime security priorities vary widely from country to country. Hall & Strating (2025, pp. 1-2) highlight different national priorities ranging from a ‘pink rush’ over fishing of prawns to the perceived destabilising actions of some countries. All these combine to create unique but often complementary challenges to different countries. There is no shortage of complex maritime security challenges for the region to confront.

Role of Air Forces in Maritime Security

National perspectives and priorities shape the roles, functions and posture of military forces towards these maritime security challenges. Booth (1977) grouped the roles performed by navies under the headings of the diplomatic, policing and military. Today, Booth's trinity of roles could apply equally to the other component forces (land, cyber, space and air) which combine to confront maritime security challenges.

Nations must decide how their air forces will contribute to this trinity. As always, directing the right focus of air force activity into the future demands rigorous thought. Resource scarcity, as ever, limits what air forces can commit to doing. Traditionally, air forces have provided traditional and well-known contributions such as intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, maritime strike, search and rescue and mobility. There is a long history of air forces contributing to maritime security. The changing security environment demands that this tradition be applied to new challenges.

Australia's National Defence Strategy demands the RAAF sustain the ability to conduct expeditionary air operations to project force into Australia's primary area of military interest to deter attempts to project power against Australia or target Australian interests, and to maintain persistent situational awareness (Department of Defence, 2026). Additionally, the strategic direction provides opportunities for RAAF collaboration with neighbours against common maritime security challenges. This is supported by the notion that maritime security synergies can be achieved and "multinational cooperation would make life easier for all" (Hall & Strating, 2025).

Multilateral Cooperation

Cooperative efforts are already part of the landscape of ASEAN maritime security. The ASEAN Plan of Action provides for the promotion of intra-ASEAN maritime security cooperation. Other schemes include the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF) and the Expanded ASEAN Maritime Forum (EAMF), which provide platforms for dialogue, cooperation, and information sharing among member states and external powers (ASEAN, 2026). Enhanced cooperation in basing and operations seems to be a matter of when, not if.

Combined Patrols

When air forces (and all domain forces) combine their effects with those of other nations the results will likely be superior to unilateral efforts. As the ASEAN-Australia Maritime Security research paper by LTCOL Bryan Brotonel from the Philippine Air Force demonstrated, Trilateral Air Patrols (TAP), as a component of a Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) in the Sulu and Celebes Seas led to a sharp reduction in piracy in that area between 2014 and 2018 (Brotonel, 2025, pp. 35-36). Integrated sortie generation and integrated operational command led to the program achieving very effective results. The maritime security effect of combined patrols was greater than the sum of the individual parts might have been.

Basing, Access and Overflight

The importance of base access in the Indo-Pacific is well known. China, the United States (US) and other countries have established a network of relationships to this end. These relationships provide the opportunity to access dual-use facilities such as terminals at overseas ports, joint patrols between Malaysia and Australia from Royal Malaysian Air Force Butterworth or formal basing arrangements such as US access to Clark Air Base in the Philippines. Reciprocal basing access arrangements (whether permanent or conditional) would be an essential part of an ASEAN combined military approach to solving common problems.

Mutual base access would be a crowning achievement of cooperation between nations. As MAJ Rizky Randiguna from the Indonesian Air Force argues, air units need base access in strategically effective locations to deliver their effects (Randiguna, 2025). Mutually available air bases are multipliers for multinational maritime operations because they allow countries' forward deployment of assets closer to the operating area, thereby increasing operational persistence.

Future Options

To address shared maritime challenges, regional nations could operate from air bases across ASEAN member states and dialogue partner nations. Australia's experience on Operation ARGOS conducting multinational maritime security operations to enforce sanctions against North Korea can offer lessons for implementation. I offer the following recommendations:

- Review current responses to common problems to identify potential synergies. The first step towards achieving the multiplying effects offered by combined operations is for ASEAN and dialogue partner air forces to identify points of overlap in their strategic priorities. It is an ongoing diplomatic challenge which all nations engage in routinely, but one which the region should increasingly translate into operational outcomes.
- Design a multinational operational concept to address the agreed challenge. This would include developing a command structure, a concept of operations, common operating procedures and information-sharing arrangements. Our collective experience also shows that multi-domain operations can achieve outsized maritime security outcomes. As cooperation matures, countries might begin responding to incidents using common procedures and coordinated processes. Eventually, new, customary codes of conduct might be codified across and beyond the region.
- Design an operational plan to meet the requirements of the concept of operations within the context of the approved accesses. This operational plan should pursue reciprocal access, overflight, basing and logistics agreements. If countries share access to one another's air bases, aircraft could patrol a larger area than if operating from sovereign bases alone. ASEAN could adopt a common approach when seeking contributions from individual nations.
- Test the plan through a combined exercise. This step would build confidence and trust among participating nations. Once the practicalities of base access, combined command, control and communications are proven, the operation can be attempted.

Combined solutions to maritime challenges are likely to be the best pathway to comprehensively solving many of the maritime security threats and challenges in our region. There is reason to believe that a combined multi-domain operation is an achievable goal in the Indo-Pacific. Air forces, as always, offer a wide range of potential contributions to combined multi-domain solutions.

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