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ASSERTING SOUTHEAST ASIA'S STRATEGIC AUTONOMY AND AGENCY:

Outcome Document from the 2025 Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security

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About this Report

This report presents an analysis of discussions conducted during the 2025 Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security. The recommendations contained herein, unless specifically noted otherwise, emerged from dialogue proceedings as interpreted by the author. This document does not represent a consensus position among participants. Video recordings of all sessions are available at <https://dams2025.wps-ph.org/>. The statements and views expressed in this publication do not necessarily reflect the positions of project sponsors or the institutional affiliations of dialogue participants.

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ASSERTING SOUTHEAST ASIA'S AGENCY:

OUTCOME DOCUMENT FROM THE 2025 DIALOGUE ON ASEAN MARITIME SECURITY

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Panel 1: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Rules-Based Order: Understanding South China Sea Claims

Panel 2: Getting Past Constraints: Ideas to Advance ASEAN's Maritime Security Agenda

Panel 3: Examining Regional Fish Stocks Management

Panel 4: Promoting Energy Security, Environmental Protection, and Scientific Research in Maritime Southeast Asia

Panel 5: Countering Disinformation and Other Malign Influence Operations

Panel 6: Confidence-Building Measures, Risk Reduction, and Dispute Resolution

Panel 7: Safeguarding Subsea Cables as an Emerging Security Challenge: A Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS)

Philippines Special Panel

Panel 8: Law Enforcement at Sea: Strengthening Regional Coast Guard Cooperation

INTRODUCTION

The 2025 Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security, convened in Manila from May 21-23, provided a strategic platform for Southeast Asian government officials, foreign policy specialists, subject-matter experts, and next-generation leaders to examine maritime issues through the lens of regional interests. The dialogue identified pathways for members of the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) to collaborate in overcoming obstacles that impede cooperation on shared concerns, realign convergent interests in establishing a rules-based regional order, and strengthen efforts to identify, deter, and address sources of instability and insecurity in Southeast Asian waters.

METHODOLOGY

This analysis draws from eight panels convened during the 2025 Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security, preceded by an opening dinner session. Each panel featured speakers delivering focused presentations on assigned topics:

Panel 1: United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and the Rules-Based Order: Understanding South China Sea Claims

Panel 2: Getting Past Constraints: Ideas to Advance ASEAN's Maritime Security Agenda

Panel 3: Examining Regional Fish Stocks Management

Panel 4: Promoting Energy Security, Environmental Protection, and Scientific Research in Maritime Southeast Asia

Panel 5: Countering Disinformation and Other Malign Influence Operations

Panel 6: Confidence-Building Measures, Risk Reduction, and Dispute Resolution

Panel 7: Safeguarding Subsea Cables as an Emerging Security Challenge: A Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Philippines Special Panel

Panel 7: Law Enforcement at Sea: Strengthening Regional Coast Guard Cooperation

KEY FINDINGS

The 2025 Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security revealed several critical insights and persistent challenges within the region's maritime domain:

Desire for Strategic Autonomy and Agency:

A predominant theme throughout the dialogue centered on ASEAN members' enduring desire for strategic autonomy and agency within their complex maritime environment. Participants consistently articulated a preference for framing regional issues based on Southeast Asia's indigenous interests rather than viewing them through the prism of the United States-China rivalry. The characterization of regional maritime concerns as mere byproducts of great power competition was perceived as undermining the agency of regional actors and their capacity for independent decision-making.

Commitment to Rules-Based International Order:

Southeast Asian nations demonstrated a persistent commitment to maintaining a rules-based international order, conceptualized as a principled framework for achieving greater justice, peace, and prosperity. The 1982 United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) is widely regarded as the cornerstone of global maritime governance and enjoys broad international support, with ASEAN member states among its most consistent and committed advocates. Several Southeast Asian countries actively participated in the development of UNCLOS during the 1970s—a point underscored by some participants to counter the narrative that international law is merely a “Western construct.”

Expanded Conception of Maritime Transparency: While the Philippines' Transparency Initiative in the West Philippine Sea is frequently characterized as a mechanism to expose Chinese aggression, transparency was conceptualized with broader objectives in maritime governance. Beyond exposing problematic behaviors, transparency was said to facilitate the development of a common understanding and clearer comprehension of threat sources, whether security-related, environmental, or economic in nature. This approach was believed to enable the construction of reasonable, evidence-based consensus regarding necessary individual and collective actions by ASEAN members on maritime issues.

Accelerating Environmental Degradation and Food Security Challenges:

Participants raised severe and worsening environmental challenges facing maritime Southeast Asia. These included overfishing that resulted in significant fish stock depletion. Activities such as blast fishing, dredging, artificial island construction, and climate change have led to marine habitat degradation. As the region heavily depends on seafood resources, sustainable management represented a critical national and regional imperative.

“Participants consistently articulated a preference for framing regional issues based on Southeast Asia's indigenous interests rather than viewing them through the prism of the United States-China rivalry.”

Role of Science Diplomacy and Collaborative Research:

The dialogue emphasized the critical importance of integrating scientific data with diplomacy and statecraft. Joint marine scientific research should serve as a diplomatic tool, addressing problems collaboratively rather than exclusively through bilateral approaches. While bilateral scientific collaborations existed, multilateral efforts required strengthening, and mechanisms such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Science and Technology demanded better utilization. Private efforts and public-private scientific partnerships should also be encouraged such as collaboration between and among regional universities and research institutions.

Interconnection Between Maritime and Information Domains:

Participants discussed the information operations linked to the maritime domain. The People's

Republic of China (PRC) was described as an active player who had actively promoted narratives designed to undermine the legitimacy of UNCLOS, the value of U.S. presence, and the agency of the Philippines and other littoral Southeast Asian states simply pursuing their legitimate maritime rights and interests. The PRC had utilized its media ecosystem, including Chinese-language media and social media platforms, to exploit existing societal divisions and spread its narratives. Southeast Asian countries were said to face challenges in countering malign foreign interference due to outdated legal frameworks and the necessity of balancing democratic freedoms with national security imperatives.

Challenges in Advancing the Code of Conduct: While participants recognized a shared commitment to achieving an effective and meaningful Code of Conduct (COC) between ASEAN and China, they also underscored the slow pace of progress. Cited obstacles included divergent interests among ASEAN member states, strategic ambiguity on China's part, and the lack of concrete enforcement mechanisms. Many participants expressed skepticism about the COC's timely conclusion, with some anticipating that its completion could take decades – if it is realized at all – potentially extending beyond the tenure of current policymakers. Notably, China's sincerity in the negotiation process was questioned; some participants argued that Beijing's participation primarily serves to reinforce its preferred narrative of "Asians solving Asian problems," while simultaneously entrenching its territorial positions in the South China Sea and without demonstrating good faith and willingness to compromise.

ASEAN's Evolving Role: ASEAN's relevance received affirmation, but the organization must evolve to effectively address urgent security challenges. The consensus principle, while preserving unity, was said to frequently paralyze decisive action. Discussion emerged regarding an "ASEAN minus X" format to enable willing countries to advance initiatives without requiring full consensus. Greater intra-ASEAN cooperation on practical security issues and confidence-building measures emerged as essential. The ASEAN Coast Guard Forum, for example, represented a promising mechanism for cooperation on maritime issues, as coast guard functions often aligned with common regional interests. External partnerships, including the Quadrilateral Security Dialogue (Quad), Australia-United Kingdom-United States (AUKUS), and United States-Japan arrangements, were perceived as complementary, providing capabilities and strategic signaling that enhance ASEAN's diplomatic efforts.

Submarine Cables as Emerging Security Priority: Submarine cables carrying most international internet traffic were seen as critical to Southeast Asia's prosperity and security. Their strategic importance is amplified due to the region's busy maritime chokepoints, making them vulnerable to accidental damage, cyberattacks, and potentially geopolitical interference or state-sponsored sabotage. Current legal and enforcement frameworks proved insufficient, with many ASEAN countries lacking national legislation to criminalize intentional cable damage beyond territorial waters.

SUMMARY OF DISCUSSIONS

Opening Dinner and Keynote Address

Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel, President and Chief Executive Officer of We Protect Our Seas (WPS), delivered agenda-setting remarks emphasizing that despite evolving geopolitical realities, the region's collective aspiration for a rules-based order, rooted in international law, remained steadfast. Dr. Ordaniel highlighted transparency as crucial for principled maritime governance, enabling a common understanding of security, environmental, and economic threats, while fostering evidence-driven consensus for collective action.

Admiral Ronnie Gil Latorilla Gavan, Commandant of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG), offered welcome remarks and introduced the keynote speaker, Secretary Eduardo Año, National Security Adviser of the Philippines. Admiral Gavan expressed confidence that the shared ideas would inspire meaningful changes and lead to actionable solutions, noting that shared maritime spaces connect nations despite distinct national realities. Through sustained cooperation and a shared sense of responsibility, he believed common challenges could become opportunities for collective progress.

During his keynote address, Secretary Año emphasized the importance of a rules-based international order, rooted in UNCLOS, as a principled aspiration for a just, peaceful, and prosperous world. He advocated for transparency in maritime governance and fostering a common operating picture to address security, environmental, and economic threats. The Secretary acknowledged that ASEAN's consensus-based approach could sometimes lead to inaction and inertia. He also highlighted severe environmental degradation in Southeast Asian waters and stressed the need for decisive action to protect the maritime environment and fishers' rights. He reiterated the Philippines' commitment to the 2016 arbitral award and international law as cornerstones of its foreign policy. He urged for an effective COC that fully aligns with UNCLOS and asserted that the existing legal framework needed only the resolve to be upheld and enforced.

Fireside Discussion: Transparency at Sea

The opening dinner continued with a fireside discussion, moderated by Dr. Prashanth Parameswaran, Founder of the ASEAN Wonk Newsletter. The discussion featured:

- Admiral Ronnie Gil Latorilla Gavan, Commandant of the Philippine Coast Guard (PCG)
- His Excellency Adam Tugio, Advisor to the Minister on Political, Legal and Security Affairs, Indonesia's Ministry of Foreign Affairs
- Mr. Hamzah bin Ishak, Deputy Director-General of National Security (Security Management) at Malaysia's National Security Council

Admiral Gavan expressed optimism regarding the rules-based order's resilience, viewing international law as the best leveler against might over right. He discussed the Philippines' Transparency Initiative, which aimed to inform the global community about Chinese aggression and galvanize public and international

support, offering a third option beyond ignoring or escalating incidents.

Ambassador Tugio preferred the term "international law-based order" for clarity, emphasizing environmental issues, maritime safety, and security as key concerns. He highlighted UNCLOS as a crucial framework despite implementation gaps and advocated for continued dialogue through ASEAN mechanisms, such as the ASEAN Maritime Security Forum.

Deputy Director General Ishak reiterated ASEAN members' commitment as UNCLOS state parties, stressing the importance of clear maritime boundary demarcation within ASEAN to facilitate regional stability. He expressed optimism for progress in COC negotiations and improved maritime law enforcement cooperation.

In short, the dialogue commenced with strong emphasis on a rules-based international order as a foundation for achieving greater justice, peace, and prosperity, particularly relevant in Southeast Asia.

Panel 1: UNCLOS and the Rules-Based Order: Understanding South China Sea Claims

This panel examined the legal foundations of maritime claims in the South China Sea, focusing on how key ASEAN claimant states interpret and apply UNCLOS. The discussion was moderated by Mr. Richard Heydarian, Senior Lecturer in the Master's in International Studies, University of the Philippines. The speakers included:

- Attorney Fretti Ganchoon, Maritime Expert and Senior State Counsel, the Philippines
- Dr. Muhammad Taufan, Lawyer, Directorate of Treaties on Political, Security and Territorial Affairs, Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia
- Dr. Huong Nguyen, Director, Center for International Law, East Sea Institute, Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam
- Mr. Hamzah bin Ishak, Deputy Director-General of National Security (Security Management) at Malaysia's National Security Council

Attorney Ganchoon asserted that a rules-based international order depends on existing rules, including international law and particularly UNCLOS – the constitution for the oceans. She emphasized that adherence to these rules would prevent the dominance of might over right. Ganchoon highlighted the significance of the 2016 South China Sea arbitration case, citing the principle of "agreements must be honored" for all UNCLOS parties, including China. She stated that the arbitral award provided an authoritative UNCLOS interpretation. It declared the invalidity of China's nine-dash line based on historical rights, as such claims could not supersede coastal states' sovereign rights in their Exclusive Economic Zones (EEZ) and continental shelves. Furthermore, the ruling concluded that the Spratly Islands features could not legally constitute islands capable of generating their own EEZs, eliminating overlapping EEZs between China and the Philippines.

Dr. Taufan considered "rules-based order" a political rather than legal term, preferring clearer formulations such as international law and UNCLOS. He characterized the 2016 arbitration as extremely useful and valuable for the state. Dr. Taufan affirmed Indonesia's consistent UNCLOS implementation, including maritime delimitation agreements with neighbors such as Malaysia, Vietnam, and the Philippines. He unequivocally rejected

China's nine-dash line and traditional fishing rights claims as having no legal basis, noting the 2016 arbitration judgment's consistency with Indonesia's assessments.

Dr. Nguyen viewed "rules-based order" as a fashionable term, preferring "legal order at sea based on international law, including UNCLOS." She clarified that UNCLOS provided the legal basis for coastal states to generate maritime zones but did not address sovereignty questions over features such as the Paracels or Spratlys. Dr. Nguyen underscored the 2016 arbitral ruling's clarifying role, particularly in defining that high-tide features in the Spratlys generate only territorial seas, not EEZs or continental shelves. She noted its contribution to clarifying how historical claims are superseded by UNCLOS for member states and guiding conduct for law enforcement and environmental protection.

Mr. Ishak affirmed Malaysia's adherence to all UNCLOS provisions as a state party since 1996, viewing it as the primary legal framework. He emphasized the critical need for clear demarcation lines to establish entitlements and jurisdiction, supporting bilateral or third-party dispute resolution. Malaysia submitted a joint extended continental shelf claim with Vietnam and pursues peace and stability guided by law.

The panel explored cooperative mechanisms, noting that the South China Sea, as a semi-enclosed sea under UNCLOS, encouraged cooperation on resource management, marine environment protection, and scientific research. The COC was discussed as a management mechanism, but panelists stressed its absolute necessity to remain consistent with UNCLOS and avoid superseding the arbitral award or dispute settlement rights. Panelists debated optimism for the COC conclusion, its relevance, and the role of United States Freedom of Navigation Operations (FONOPs). They generally affirmed UNCLOS's continued relevance as a guiding framework and highlighted that bilateral negotiations, though time-consuming, often serve as the primary means for dispute resolution.

Panel 2: Getting Past Constraints -Ideas to Advance ASEAN's Maritime Security Agenda

Panel 2 addressed ASEAN mechanisms' role in promoting maritime security cooperation and deliberated on the prolonged COC negotiations. A live poll among attendees revealed prevalent pessimism regarding COC completion, with many believing it will never be completed or would require a decade.

This panel was moderated by Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel and featured the following speakers:

- Prof. Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak, Professor of International Relations, Faculty of Political Science, Chulalongkorn University
- Dr. Chiew Ping Hoo, Founder, East Asian IR Caucus
- Dr. Collin Koh, Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies, Nanyang Technological University
- Mr. Don McLain Gill, Lecturer, Department of International Studies, De La Salle University

Professor Pongsudhirak characterized the COC as a "saga," potentially outlasted by events and the United States-China conflict. He noted ASEAN's historical ineffectiveness and divisions on various issues, from the Mekong River to the Myanmar coup. He suggested that

ASEAN claimant states must pursue serious structural and institutional reforms to effectively counter Chinese actions. Professor Pongsudhirak proposed reforming the ASEAN Secretary-General selection and considering a variable geometry approach for maritime issues to advance without full consensus. He believed China benefited from a weak and divided ASEAN.

Dr. Hoo concurred on the need for intra-ASEAN consultation due to differing national priorities that have prolonged the COC deadlock. She indicated that China's recent shift toward desiring a binding COC might represent a tactic to institutionalize its claims. Dr. Hoo stressed the need for ASEAN member states to align positions, bridge gaps between mainland and maritime Southeast Asia, and conduct whole-of-nation consultations involving government, academia, think tanks, and scientists. She highlighted the growing importance of marine biology research as a potential area for Chinese engagement, given China's research strength in this field.

Dr. Collin Koh distinguished between practical security cooperation and confidence and security-building measures (CSBMs). He noted established intra-ASEAN cooperation as a foundation for confidence-building that has facilitated political settlements on overlapping maritime zones. Koh identified China as both a "decisive factor" and a "disruptive factor" in the COC, often setting the agenda based on Chinese interests. He expressed doubt about China negotiating in good faith, citing foot-dragging before the 2016 arbitral award and subsequent shifts toward appearing constructive while militarizing features. He warned that COC failure would burden ASEAN member states, reinforcing ASEAN's image as a talk shop. Koh urged focusing on CSBMs that moderate maritime forces' behavior rather than merely practical cooperation.

"The 'ASEAN minus X' concept was proposed to enable willing member states to advance initiatives without full consensus, preventing organizational irrelevance."

Mr. Gill framed ASEAN maritime security cooperation as crucial for insulating the region from internal issues and external structural challenges. He critiqued exclusive focus on threat perception, advocating instead for shared interests in upholding international law across all maritime zones, which could facilitate less controversial cooperation. Gill emphasized the need to operationalize the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific (AOIP) through political will and robust institutional processes, citing the joint ASEAN maritime security exercise under Indonesia's chairmanship as a positive step requiring institutionalization. He stressed the importance of confidence-building, interoperability, capacity-building, and information sharing as core binding factors. Gill argued that if any country violated international law, it became the responsibility of every state, including Southeast Asian countries, to hold that country accountable.

During the panel, Dr. Ordaniel conducted a live poll to gauge participants' perspectives on key issues. An

overwhelming majority indicated their expectation that the COC negotiations would ultimately remain inconclusive. The panel discussed whether ASEAN remained relevant given the pessimistic COC outlook. Panelists acknowledged ASEAN's important role as a dialogue platform, especially through effective mechanisms such as the ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) and ADMM Plus. However, they called for deep institutional reforms to overcome limitations such as the consensus-based approach, which often paralyzes urgent action. The "ASEAN minus X" concept was proposed to enable willing member states to advance initiatives without full consensus, preventing organizational irrelevance. The importance of external actors, particularly the United States, Japan, Australia, and European partners, was discussed. These external partnerships were perceived as complementary to ASEAN efforts, providing capabilities and reinforcing rules. The Philippines' Transparency Initiative was highlighted, with proponents arguing its necessity to expose Chinese aggression and galvanize support rather than being unnecessarily provocative.

Panel 3: Examining Regional Fish Stocks Management

Panel 3 focused on regional fish stocks management, with UNCLOS highlighted as a pivotal instrument that transformed fisheries from a common resource into one with rights-based ownership. Professor Ma. Carmen Ablan Lagman, De La Salle University, was the panel chair. She was joined by:

- Mr. Isara Chanrachkij, Director, Project Planning and Management Division, Training Department, Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDC)
- Prof. Sazlina Salleh, Deputy Director, Center for Policy Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia
- Dr. Charina Lyn Amedo-Repollo, Assistant Professor, Deputy Director for Research, Marine Science Institute, University of the Philippines
- Dr. Chien Thai, Division Chief, Capture Fisheries and Resource Management Department, Research Institute for Aquaculture Number 3 (RIA3)

Mr. Chanrachkij provided a regional overview, noting global increases in aquaculture production and high per capita fish consumption in Southeast Asia. He identified overfishing as a serious issue, stemming from harvests exceeding maximum sustainable yield, IUU fishing, and habitat degradation from human activity and climate change. Mr. Chanrachkij highlighted challenges of stock assessment in tropical, multi-species, multi-gear fisheries. He called for improved data collection, capacity building, and collaborative methodologies among ASEAN member states. He also suggested developing aquaculture to reduce pressure on marine capture fisheries, noting seaweed culture's potential for carbon emission reduction.

Dr. Amedo-Repollo presented data on fish stock decline in the West Philippine Sea across fish diversity, fish density, and fish biomass. Key contributing factors included habitat degradation from blast fishing, crown-of-thorns starfish outbreaks, and reclamation/island building driven by geopolitics. Another major cause was

climate change effects, including increased typhoon intensity and frequency, and rising sea surface temperatures. Dr. Amedo-Repollo noted the Kalayaan Island Group's critical role as a larvae source for neighboring countries, emphasizing the need for protection and cooperative conservation. Proposed solutions included enhancing Marine Protected Areas (MPAs), implementing ecosystem-based and collaborative management, increasing marine scientific research despite conflicts, and strengthening public awareness and education.

Dr. Thai reported that Vietnam's marine fish stock has declined 18-20 percent compared to twenty years ago, with actual catches exceeding sustainable harvest levels. Contributing factors included overfishing, unsustainable practices, marine pollution, climate change, ocean acidification, and habitat loss. Vietnam's solutions included controlling fishing capacity, restoring marine ecosystems, developing marine aquaculture as an alternative protein source, and applying modern monitoring technologies such as satellite-based vessel monitoring systems. He called for a unified legal framework for sustainable fishery management across ASEAN, expanding MPAs, strengthening IUU fishing regulations, and linking data between ASEAN countries to prevent cross-border violations.

Dr. Salleh discussed policy aspects, reiterating significant fish stock decline and human activity, and pollution impacts. While aquaculture was projected to grow significantly, she stressed the need for a proactive, robust framework to ensure environmental sustainability and economic resilience. Salleh highlighted that ASEAN possesses numerous policy documents and frameworks but noted the need to transition from top-down to bottom-up policy-making. She emphasized that existing policies, guided by international commitments such as UNCLOS and the Paris Agreement, required better implementation and specific, scientifically-backed approaches to avoid redundancy.

Panelists identified data availability and standardization as critical constraints, alongside the challenge of integrating fisheries concerns into broader security and boundary discussions. Reluctance to share data due to national security and data governance issues was noted. They acknowledged that while fisheries contribute a small percentage to national economies, their impact on food security and livelihoods remains immense. The session concluded with calls for stronger intra-ASEAN cooperation on fisheries, joint management efforts, and exploration of new technologies, while stressing the importance of community engagement and incorporating traditional knowledge in policy-making.

Panel 4: Promoting Energy Security, Environmental Protection, and Scientific Research in Maritime Southeast Asia

Panel 4 explored interconnected themes of energy, environment, and science within the framework of maritime governance under UNCLOS. Mr. Neil Silva, Senior Lecturer at the University of the Philippines College of Law, served as Panel Chair, joined by:

- Dr. Sau Pinn "Abe" Woo, Deputy Director of the Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies (CEMACS), Universiti Sains Malaysia

- Professor Victor Andres "Dindo" Manhit, Chief Executive Officer and Founder, The Stratbase Group

Mr. Silva established the context by highlighting the marine environment's profound connection to security, arguing that environmental neglect can lead to instability through poverty and transnational crime resulting from collapsed fish stocks. He underscored Southeast Asia's high marine biodiversity and vulnerability to ecosystem threats and natural disasters, while noting its potential for climate action.

Dr. Woo emphasized the ocean's transboundary nature, stating that water flows and respects no political boundaries. He characterized Southeast Asia as the custodian of the world's marine biodiversity, bearing significant responsibility for protection, especially within the Coral Triangle. Dr. Woo highlighted species interconnectedness across the South China Sea, regardless of nautical miles or territorial claims, warning that marine ecosystem collapse would result in substantial costs in lost ecosystem services. He projected the South China Sea as the region's food basket, making its protection critical for food security. Dr. Woo identified three major impending climate change threats: warmer oceans, increased acidity, and reduced oxygen levels. He urged greater multilateral scientific collaboration within ASEAN, noting that existing bilateral collaborations with external partners often fail to translate into region-wide efforts. He lamented that science was not sufficiently recognized as a diplomatic tool within ASEAN, hindering common benefits.

Professor Manhit presented the Philippines' experience as a maritime and archipelagic nation facing both environmental challenges and geopolitical tensions. He identified severe marine environment threats, including plastic pollution, IUU fishing, climate change impacts, habitat destruction, and large-scale island building. He underscored the 2016 arbitral award as a landmark victory, not only for invalidating China's nine-dash line but also for finding that China violated environmental obligations, establishing a powerful precedent for other ASEAN countries. Professor Manhit stressed the need for a whole-of-society approach involving public, private, and international sectors, as the Philippines could not act alone.

The discussion explored using common environmental issues as an entry point for ASEAN cooperation and unity, drawing parallels to the European Coal and Steel Community experience. Panelists agreed on functional cooperation to drive ASEAN institution-building. The under-exploitation of UNCLOS's Marine Scientific Research (MSR) provisions within ASEAN was noted, with calls for strengthening existing mechanisms such as the ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Science and Technology and fostering more ASEAN-to-ASEAN exchanges and embedding programs for scientists. The panel also debated whether ASEAN should function as a unified negotiating bloc in multilateral climate treaties, given shared problems and global responsibility. The panelists affirmed this potential, particularly in forums such as the Conference of the Parties (COP), but noted ASEAN's current focus on national interests. The panel addressed the challenge of weaponization of archaeology by countries to assert historical claims, reiterating international law's importance as the great equalizer,

defining legitimate claims. The session concluded with calls for ASEAN to evolve from a community of inter-relationships to a community of inter-responsibilities, signifying a potential second founding of ASEAN with a new vision and idea.

Panel 5: Countering Disinformation and Other Malign Influence Operations

Panel 5 addressed the critical challenge of malign foreign interference and disinformation operations in Southeast Asia, particularly regarding the maritime domain. The panel was moderated by Mr. Richard Heydarian, Senior Lecturer, Master's in International Studies, University of the Philippines. The speakers included:

- Dr. Chong Ja Ian, Associate Professor of Political Science at the National University of Singapore
- Mr. Jonathan Malaya, Assistant Director General of the National Security Council
- Commodore Jay Tarriela, Chief of the West Philippine Sea Transparency Group at the Philippine Coast Guard
- Dr. Tricia Yeoh, Associate Professor of Practice at the School of Politics and International Relations, University of Nottingham Malaysia

Dr. Chong identified four primary narratives that the PRC had employed in its information operations regarding South China Sea disputes. The first narrative systematically eroded confidence in international law by delegitimizing key legal precedents, particularly the 2016 arbitral tribunal ruling. This narrative deliberately undermined the legal foundations upon which smaller and middle-power states depend for peaceful dispute resolution. The second narrative portrayed the United States as orchestrating a containment and encirclement strategy against China, casting regional partners such as the Philippines as unwitting instruments of American escalation. This messaging strategically exploited anti-colonial sentiments by framing Western engagement as the contemporary suppression of Global South autonomy and development. The third narrative characterized Philippine sovereignty assertions as inherently destabilizing forces that threaten regional peace and risk military confrontation. This framing served the dual purpose of diplomatically isolating the Philippines while simultaneously creating fissures within the ASEAN consensus on territorial sovereignty issues. The fourth narrative emphasized the purported economic dependence of ASEAN member states on China as a foundation for regional influence. However, this messaging encountered significant challenges when confronted with the reality of substantial trade deficits that favor China and the increasingly diversified sources of foreign direct investment throughout the region.

Dr. Tricia Yeoh distinguished between misinformation (unintentional false information sharing) and disinformation (intentional malicious influence). She provided a nuanced Malaysian context, noting a significant increase in Malaysian favorability toward China, strongly linked to growing anti-Western stance, particularly due to Gaza conflict sentiments. Yeoh highlighted Malaysia's unique demographics, where a large Malaysian Chinese population with cultural and family ties to mainland China proved more susceptible to

Beijing-origin narratives disseminated through Chinese-language media and social media platforms such as TikTok and Xiaohongshu. She explained that different Malaysian communities experience different information ecosystems, leading to varying beliefs and responses. Malaysia's Anti-Fake News Act attempt was rejected due to fears of authoritarian overreach and dissent stifling, highlighting the delicate balance of addressing disinformation in democratic contexts.

Commodore Tarriela described the challenges that Philippine forces navigate while defending their nation's sovereign maritime rights. He cited specific incidents of Chinese aggression, including water cannon attacks and other hostile actions against Philippine vessels operating within the Philippines' EEZ. He noted that such aggressive behaviors were systematically accompanied by immediate Chinese counter-narratives designed to obscure the nature of these incidents or provide retroactive justification for unlawful conduct. In response to these persistent challenges, Tarriela positioned the Philippines' Transparency Initiative as a carefully calibrated strategic approach that offered a viable alternative to passive acceptance of Chinese aggression or direct military escalation. He said the transparency strategy reflected a deliberate effort to cultivate international understanding and multilateral support through comprehensive documentation of Chinese actions that violate established international legal frameworks. By providing clear evidence of these violations to the global community, the Philippines sought to create sustained diplomatic pressure that constrains Chinese behavior while preserving regional stability and avoiding the risks associated with direct military confrontation.

Mr. Malaya underscored the Philippines' exposure to significant threats beyond the information space, including vigorous espionage activities by the PRC through United Front work and alleged Chinese agents. He mentioned arrests of individuals conducting surveillance activities near Philippine military bases and discoveries of submarine drones transmitting to mainland China. Malaya highlighted the Philippines' deficient legal framework, with outdated espionage laws and a lack of foreign interference legislation, making legal updates a National Security Council priority. He cited Singapore's Foreign Interference Countermeasures Act (FICA) and Australia's similar legislation as potential models. Mr. Malaya concluded that while transparency alone might not change Chinese behavior, it remained crucial for galvanizing domestic support and gaining international attention and alliances. The objective involved making the Filipino people aware of the struggle, ensuring future electoral decisions are influenced by this critical issue.

Panel 6: Confidence-Building Measures, Risk Reduction, and Dispute Resolution

Panel 6 focused on preventing armed conflict in the South China Sea through confidence-building measures, risk reduction, and dispute resolution. Professor Renato Cruz de Castro, Distinguished Professor, De La Salle University-Manila, served as the panel chair. He was joined by:

- His Excellency Lai Thai Binh, Ambassador of Viet Nam to the Philippines

- His Excellency Agus Widjojo, Ambassador of Indonesia to the Philippines
- Vice Admiral Alexander Lopez (Retired, Armed Forces of the Philippines), Spokesperson, National Maritime Council (NMC), Philippines
- Assistant Secretary Marshall Louis Alferez, Assistant Secretary, Maritime and Ocean Affairs Office, Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines

Ambassador Lai identified the South China Sea as a volatile flashpoint due to longstanding unresolved disputes complicated by geopolitical conflicts and growing nationalism. He stressed the need for effective mechanisms and joint efforts, particularly through COC negotiations, despite acknowledging slow progress.

Ambassador Widjojo attributed the danger to a mixture of various interests from neighboring countries and external great powers. He noted that adversaries often did not speak the same language, hindering agreement on conflict management despite available instruments. Ambassador Widjojo firmly asserted that ASEAN remains the primary platform for ensuring stability and security in the South China Sea, promoting inclusive dialogue and CBMs. He defended ASEAN's historical efforts, arguing that its foundational principles of peace and neutrality have replaced Cold War-era military competition, advocating for a "balance of interest" over a "balance of power."

"...ASEAN should cultivate culturally relevant approaches based on familiarity and shared regional values rather than importing Western models that may be overly structured or legalistic."

Rear Admiral Lopez provided a comprehensive perspective, emphasizing that CBMs, risk reduction, and dispute resolution constitute essential components of a principled but practical approach to peace and stability in Southeast Asia. He outlined three challenges stalling the COC: divergent ASEAN interests, with some member states prioritizing economic ties with China over strategic convergence; Chinese ambiguity, with Beijing avoiding binding commitments that restrict unilateral action; and lack of enforcement mechanisms, as even a completed COC would remain ineffective without implementation. Rear Admiral Lopez argued that ASEAN must evolve, adopting process flexibility while maintaining principled firmness. He proposed the "ASEAN minus X format," enabling coalitions of the willing to undertake joint patrols, coordinate surveillance, or issue strong statements without awaiting full consensus, thus facilitating norm entrepreneurship. He viewed external mechanisms such as AUKUS and the Quad not as threats to ASEAN centrality but as complementary partners providing hard deterrence, domain awareness, and strategic signaling that rules would be enforced. He concluded that ASEAN must reimagine consensus, encourage norm-setters, and coordinate with external partners to avoid irrelevance.

The discussion addressed prolonged COC negotiations, with Ambassador Binh acknowledging difficulties while stressing the importance of persistent

efforts and substantive cooperation in less sensitive areas such as marine scientific research and environmental initiatives. Admiral Lopez suggested treating the COC as a living document that could be agreed upon and enforced in workable provisions rather than awaiting a perfect, comprehensive agreement, addressing realities faced by frontline personnel.

A key debate point concerned the cultural relativity of CBMs, with Ambassador Widjojo arguing that ASEAN should cultivate culturally relevant approaches based on familiarity and shared regional values rather than importing Western models that may be overly structured or legalistic. He believed that ASEAN problems are better solved by the ASEAN people themselves, as external interventions can complicate matters. Admiral Lopez concurred, citing existing informal CBMs among military and coast guard forces in Southeast Asia that effectively resolve incidents without formalization. He expressed optimism that China might eventually come to its senses and become part of the global order, but it must first address the trust issue caused by discrepancies between rhetoric and actions.

The panel discussed the balance between minilateralism and multilateralism. Ambassador Binh supported grouping as a cooperation form, complementing ASEAN efforts and adhering to international law. Admiral Lopez advocated for multilateralism due to its strength in legitimizing

collective action, building trust, and reducing miscalculation, acknowledging its slowness due to consensus requirements. However, he critiqued unilateralism for inviting isolation, citing China as an example. Panelists underscored the intergenerational nature of the South China Sea conflict and the

importance of continuing the struggle for sovereignty and freedom for future generations.

Panel 7: Safeguarding Subsea Cables as an Emerging Security Challenge

Panel 7, a special panel supported by the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung (KAS) Philippines, focused on submarine cables' increasingly critical importance. These previously overlooked cables have gained prominence due to interruptions from suspected sabotage. The panel was moderated by Mr. Patrick Zoll, Correspondent for Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, Neue Zürcher Zeitung. The speakers included:

- Dr. Su Wai Mon, Research Fellow, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore
- Mr. Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma, Researcher, Department of International Relations, CSIS Indonesia
- Dr. Bich Tran, Research Fellow, YCAPS; Nonresident Fellow, WPS

Dr. Su Wai Mon emphasized that subsea cables constitute critical national infrastructure essential for daily communications, national security operations, and economic activities. They were preferred over satellites due to superior cost-effectiveness. She noted that Southeast Asia had a high concentration of cables, with Singapore alone planning over 40 cables by 2028. Dr. Su

Wai Mon discussed significant vulnerabilities facing subsea cables, including accidental damage from fishing and shipping activities, natural disasters, cyberattacks, and emerging geopolitical sabotage threats. She also mentioned low redundancy as a dangerous single point of failure, leaving countries highly exposed. According to Dr. Su Wai Mon, a major challenge lies in legal and enforcement constraints. While UNCLOS Article 113 called for national legislation to criminalize intentional cable damage on the high seas and in EEZs, most ASEAN countries had failed to implement these provisions, and UNCLOS provided no enforcement rights beyond territorial waters for boarding or arresting vessels. She recommended that countries formally designate cables as critical national infrastructure in their policies to prioritize protection measures and implement UNCLOS Article 113 through domestic legislation to criminalize intentional cable damage.

Mr. Kharisma echoed cables' importance, noting Southeast Asia's location at busy maritime chokepoints makes it both a hub and a vulnerability point. Indonesia, as a developing country with high digital economy ambitions, faced challenges governing its numerous regulated and unregulated submarine cable segments. Kharisma highlighted increasing risks of cables becoming geopolitical interference targets, citing incidents around Taiwan and in the Baltic Sea as examples of gray zone tactics with high degrees of plausible deniability. He observed that cabling consortia increasingly reflect geopolitical alignments, posing dilemmas for developing countries relying on technologies and financing from both the United States and China, while attempting to maintain strategic non-alignment. He said domestic institutional silos also hindered long-term strategic risk assessment for procurement and regulation.

Dr. Bich Tran agreed that subsea cables had become critical infrastructure, adding that they enabled vital services ranging from communication to telesurgery and national defense. She warned that high dependency and increasing demand for internet services made any subsea cable disruption potentially catastrophic. To address growing vulnerabilities, Dr. Tran advocated for the immediate deployment of Maritime Domain Awareness (MDA) capabilities during prevention, response, and mitigation phases of subsea cable resilience. During the prevention phase, she proposed using zone-specific approaches, employing different MDA tools for different maritime zones, from cable landing sites to international waters. She highlighted the use of advanced satellite technologies to track even "dark vessels" that disabled identification signals. For the response phase, MDA tools could help to locate the damage faster and coordinate repair vessels and other relevant authorities. In the mitigation phase, MDA tools could identify safe areas for future cables. For long-term protection, she stressed the need for a comprehensive framework built on international cooperation, improved interagency coordination within each country, and public-private partnerships to align commercial risk management with national security imperatives.

Panelists acknowledged that while sabotage had occurred globally, direct evidence of state-sponsored sabotage in Southeast Asia had not been reported. However, they stressed the need for proactive

preparedness. The challenge of flag states and flags of convenience complicated accountability. The panel debated the strategic implications of decoupling in cable systems, with Kharisma arguing that more inclusive systems with diverse ownership would reduce sabotage likelihood. Ultimately, the session stressed the need to elevate subsea cable security from a niche technical concern to a mainstream national priority, demanding adequate resource allocation and coordination.

Panel 8: Law Enforcement at Sea - Strengthening Regional Coast Guard Cooperation

Panel 8 focused on the coast guards' critical role in Southeast Asia, their strategic challenges, and visions for future cooperation, particularly in preventing armed conflict. The panel was moderated by Dr. Rahman Yaacob, Research Fellow at the Lowy Institute, and featured:

- Rear Admiral Samuel Kowaas, Executive Secretary, Indonesia Coast Guard (BAKAMLA)
- Senior Colonel Khanh Van Vu (Retired, Vietnamese People's Army), Former Director, Department of International Studies, Institute for Defence Strategy, Ministry of National Defence of Vietnam
- Commodore Jay Tarriela, Chief, West Philippine Sea Transparency Office

Rear Admiral Kowaas identified the most strategic challenge of the Indonesian Coast Guard as dealing with a spectrum of problems from petty crimes to issues that could actually start a war. He said BAKAMLA's strategy involved strengthening its organization, national regulations, and enhancing integration and cooperation among maritime law enforcement agencies both domestically and regionally within ASEAN.

Senior Colonel Vu highlighted that as a relatively young force (established in 1998), the Vietnam Coast Guard sought to build capability through cooperation with ASEAN Coast Guards. Its mission included protecting sovereignty, sovereign rights, and jurisdiction, combating crime (drug and human trafficking), and protecting fishermen and production activities at sea.

Commodore Tarriela outlined strategic opportunities provided by coast guard organizations in Southeast Asia. He emphasized their maritime governance (constabulary) roles related to maritime safety, environmental protection, and law enforcement. These functions facilitated collaboration as they served common national interests. Commodore Tarriela stated that coast guard vessels, unlike military assets, de-escalate tension and avoid sending provocative signals. The PCG's primary strategic challenges included violations and aggressive actions by the PRC within the Philippines' EEZ, such as harassment of Filipino fishermen, and pervasive disinformation campaigns. He noted the PCG's focus on monitoring Chinese research vessels in the Luzon Strait conducting illegal marine scientific research.

The state of ASEAN Coast Guard cooperation was discussed, with Admiral Kowaas highlighting the rapid progress of the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACF) since its conceptualization in 2022. Despite not being formally established as an ASEAN technical body, the ACF has held technical expert group meetings (with all 10 member states), conducted regular morning briefings for

information sharing, and performed joint exercises. He expressed optimism that the ACF, with strong foreign ministry support, was on a rapid path to formalization. Colonel Vu acknowledged COC process difficulties, stating that differences are too far to resolve quickly. He supported the idea of the ACF developing its own internal code of conduct for peaceful engagement, which could then set an example for external powers such as China. Commodore Tarriela affirmed that ASEAN Coast Guards already understood proper and respectful behavior toward each other, avoiding aggressive actions such as water cannoning or ramming. He clarified that the ACF primarily discusses regional interests related to its functions and does not typically address the China threat directly in forums.

Other challenges faced by individual coast guards were discussed. Indonesia's BAKAMLA faced budget cuts but copes by prioritizing operational aspects, collaborating with other domestic agencies, and relying on its national surveillance system. Vietnam Coast Guard faced questions about alleged land reclamation in the Spratly Islands, which Colonel Vu explained as reinforcement against erosion due to harsh climate and rising sea levels, protecting inhabitants and fishermen. He attributed Vietnam's relatively calm relations with China over the South China Sea to a long history of living with a big neighbor, employing party diplomacy, state diplomacy, and people-to-people diplomacy to resolve problems. Philippines PCG experienced dramatic increases in foreign assistance strategically managed through significant personnel expansion, making the PCG larger than the Philippine Navy and Marines combined, with this capacity building seen as critical for effectively manning new assets.

The visions for future coast guards largely converged on strengthening capabilities and fostering

developing capabilities and articulating positions over the past 5-10 years offers hope for establishing a gold standard for regional maritime security in the future.

The session concluded with an impassioned plea from Commodore Tarriela for ASEAN to demonstrate regional will in addressing challenges, urging member states to cooperate, especially in advancing feasible COC provisions. He highlighted that the Philippines' Transparency Initiative had significantly increased citizen awareness and gained international support, particularly concerning fishermen harassment and marine environment damage. These issues, he argued, were key to unifying Southeast Asia in confronting Chinese aggression, underscoring the potential of science diplomacy in the South China Sea.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

Uphold and Strengthen the Rules-Based Order: Maintain a steadfast commitment to UNCLOS as the foundational legal framework for maritime governance. Ensure that any COC for the South China Sea fully aligns with international law, particularly UNCLOS, and avoids provisions that exclude, sideline, or create exemptions to its principles.

Enhance ASEAN's Cooperation and Agency: Strengthen intra-ASEAN cooperation by aligning national interests and regional cooperation. Reimagine the consensus principle within ASEAN, allowing for unity of purpose with flexibility for formats such as the "ASEAN minus X" approach, enabling willing states to advance initiatives without full consensus. Acknowledge and leverage external partnerships as complementary efforts that bring critical capabilities and strategic signaling to enforce rules, ensuring structured complementarity rather than viewing them as threats to ASEAN centrality.

"...resolving maritime security challenges represents an intergenerational task requiring continuous dialogue, adaptation, and a shift from a 'community of inter-relationships' to a 'community of inter-responsibilities.'"

regional cooperation. Philippine PCG envisioned a regional coast guard in Southeast Asia prioritizing maritime governance, humanitarian efforts, and supporting constabulary roles rather than engaging in armed conflict, seeking continued support from middle powers in capability building and sharing understanding of international law enforcement. Vietnam Coast Guard emphasized strategic autonomy and resilience, prioritizing self-reliance while welcoming external support for capability building. Indonesia's BAKAMLA's non-alignment policy allowed broad cooperation with many countries, believing maritime security requires collaborative efforts, welcoming assistance while ensuring external influence does not dictate foundational concept papers.

Panelists recognized that resolving maritime security challenges represents an intergenerational task requiring continuous dialogue, adaptation, and a shift from a "community of inter-relationships" to a "community of inter-responsibilities." Progress made in

Build Trust to Address Maritime Security Challenges: Institutionalize the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum, with the goal of developing standardized protocols for maritime engagement and incident response at sea. Develop a unified regional legal framework that supports the creation of a comprehensive network of marine protected areas across ASEAN waters. Encourage ASEAN member states to expedite the resolution of their disputes as clear demarcation of maritime boundaries will reduce the potential for misunderstandings and conflicts.

Promote Environmental Sustainability: Implement sustainable fisheries management practices, including controlling fishing capacity, reducing destructive methods, restoring marine habitats, and developing marine aquaculture as an alternative. Establish and expand MPAs, considering transboundary approaches to conservation. Enhance marine scientific research, data collection, and standardization to inform management

strategies, overcoming geopolitical constraints on access to research areas. Integrate scientific data with diplomacy and statecraft to leverage knowledge for collaborative problem-solving. Foster cross-pillar cooperation within ASEAN to address the interconnectedness of environmental, security, and economic issues.

Counter Disinformation with a Multi-Layered Strategy:

Combine immediate tactical responses with long-term institutional reforms. Pre-bunk and rapid debunk disinformation by prioritizing the first release of factual statements. Leverage media partnerships that embed journalists in operational missions to document incidents firsthand. Coordinate messaging through a whole-of-government approach, complemented by targeted public education. Adopt a crowdsourcing methodology that encourages academics, think tank experts, and scholars to contribute their expertise despite potential professional risks. Build societal resilience and maintain independent, credible fact-checking mechanisms that preserve public trust across political divides. Call for ASEAN-wide transparency initiatives.

Protect Subsea Cables with a Comprehensive

Framework: Designate submarine cables as national critical infrastructure in national policies to prioritize their protection. Adopt and implement national laws to criminalize intentional damage to cables, as mandated by UNCLOS Article 113, and strengthen enforcement mechanisms. Leverage MDA tools for monitoring, detecting suspicious activities near cable routes, facilitating repair, and mitigating risks.

NEXT STEPS

Sustain the Dialogue: The Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security is envisioned as an annual Track 1.5 process, bringing together policymakers, thought leaders, and security professionals to deepen collective understanding and cooperation. Future iterations may be hosted in other ASEAN cities to broaden engagement.

Inform The Manila Dialogue: Insights and contributions from this dialogue will inform the Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea, a larger Track 1.5 event involving key stakeholders beyond ASEAN.

Leverage ASEAN Chairmanship: The Philippines, preparing for its ASEAN chairmanship next year, aims to advance an agenda reflecting these critical discussions, particularly regarding maritime security.

Operationalize Cooperation: Focus will remain on operationalizing shared interests through concrete mechanisms, including exploring "ASEAN minus X" formats for joint patrols and surveillance, and continuing COC negotiations while exploring practical mini-codes of conduct among certain actors such as coast guards.

Invest in Public Awareness and Education: Crucially, there is a need to continuously educate the public, especially younger generations, about the factual realities of maritime issues to build national and regional will, counter disinformation, and ensure sustained policy support.

Foster Scientific Networks: Efforts will continue to foster networks of marine biologists, coral reef experts, and other scientists from across Southeast Asia to pursue collaborative field research and enable evidence-driven recommendations for maritime governance.

Address Institutional Reforms: While challenging, discussions highlighted the need for ASEAN to continuously assert and strengthen its collective and individual agency, potentially through internal reforms that move beyond reactive diplomacy toward a more proactive, rules-based, and interest-driven approach.

Ensure Long-term Commitment: Recognizing that challenges such as the South China Sea dispute are "intergenerational," the focus is on maintaining positions and building capabilities for future generations to continue the struggle for sovereign rights and a rules-based order.

ABOUT THE LEAD CONVENORS

Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel is President and CEO of WPS, a Manila-based maritime security research and policy think tank. Concurrently, he is also Associate Professor of International Security Studies at Tokyo International University (TIU) in Japan. He holds a Ph.D. in International Relations and specializes in the study of offshore territorial and maritime entitlement disputes in Asia. His teaching and research revolve around maritime security and ocean governance, ASEAN regionalism, and broadly, U.S. alliances and engagements in the Indo-Pacific. From 2016 to 2019, he was based in Honolulu and was the holder of the endowed Admiral Joe Vasey Fellowship at the Pacific Forum. Dr. Ordaniel then served as director for the Forum's Maritime Security Program. His previous research on maritime security in Asia was funded by the Japan Society for the Promotion of Science (JSPS), 2020-2024. He is the lead convenor of two track 1.5 processes—The Manila Dialogue on the South China Sea and the Annual Dialogue on ASEAN Maritime Security.

Commodore Jay Tarriela currently serves as Chief of the West Philippine Sea Transparency Group under the Office of the Commandant, Philippine Coast Guard. He successfully completed his Ph.D. at the National Graduate Institute for Policy Studies (GRIPS) under the GRIPS Global Governance (G-cube) Program in Tokyo as a Japan International Cooperation Agency (JICA) ASEAN Public Policy Leadership scholar. He has participated in various military and coast guard training programs both domestically and internationally. Dr. Tarriela holds a graduate degree from the Philippine Merchant Marine Academy Graduate School and a Master of Policy Studies from GRIPS and the Japan Coast Guard Academy. He was among the first participants in the Maritime Safety and Security Program jointly launched by both institutions in 2016. Furthermore, Dr. Tarriela was selected as part of the inaugural cohort of the 2021 Pacific Forum United States-Philippines' Next Generation Leaders' Initiative. Additionally, he was chosen as a fellow for the 2021 East-West Center United States-Philippines Alliance Fellowship in Washington, DC, USA. Dr. Tarriela has authored analyses and policy briefs for The Diplomat, The National Interest, and Pacific Forum's Issues & Insights, RSIS' IDSS Paper, among others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Dr. Bich Tran is a Research Fellow at the S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies (RSIS), a Non-resident Research Fellow at the Yokosuka Council on Asia-Pacific Studies (YCAPS), and a Non-resident Fellow at We Protect our Seas (WPS). She has been selected to join the 2025 Young Strategists Forum and 2024 International Strategy Forum. Her research interests include grand strategy and issues at the intersection between geopolitics and technology, such as cybersecurity, maritime domain awareness, and subsea cable resilience. A list of her publications is available on Google Scholar.



<https://dams2025.wps-ph.org/>

ANNEX 1: 2025 AGENDA

DIALOGUE ON ASEAN MARITIME SECURITY

MAY 21-23, 2025 | MANILA, PHILIPPINES



MAY 21, 2025 | WEDNESDAY

Cocktail and Networking begins at 17:30. Program begins at 18:00.

18:00-20:00 – Opening Dinner and Keynote Address



Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel
President & CEO, WPS
Agenda Setting



ADM Ronnie Gil L. Gavan
Commandant, Philippine Coast Guard
Welcoming Remarks and Introduction of the Keynote Speaker



Sec. Eduardo Año
National Security Adviser, Republic of the Philippines
Keynote Address

Dinner Begins...

(As Part of the Opening Dinner) Transparency at Sea: A Fireside Discussion Featuring



ADM Ronnie Gil L. Gavan
Commandant, Philippine Coast Guard



H.E. Adam Tugio
Advisor to the Minister on Political, Legal and Security Affairs,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Republic of Indonesia



Hamzah bin Ishak
Deputy Director-General of National Security (Security Management),
National Security Council (NSC), Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia



Dr. Prashanth Parameswaran
Founder, ASEAN Wonk Newsletter
Moderator

9:00-10:30 – Panel 1

UNCLOS and the Rules-Based Order: Understanding South China Sea Claims

The Philippines, Malaysia, Vietnam, Brunei, and Indonesia have all emphasized the importance of adhering to international law in managing and resolving maritime disputes. Each of these nations references UNCLOS as the foundation for their presence and operations in the South China Sea.

This session will address the following questions:

- What specific provisions of UNCLOS support their claims?
- What are each party's preferred modalities for dispute management and resolution?
- How does each party perceive the presence and operations of “user states” in the South China Sea?



Richard Heydarian

Senior Lecturer, Master in International Studies, University of the Philippines
Panel Chair



Atty. Fretti Ganchoon

Maritime Expert and Senior State Counsel, Philippines
Panelist



Dr. Muhammad Taufan

Lawyer, Directorate of Treaties on Political, Security and Territorial Affairs,
Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Indonesia
Panelist



Dr. Thi Lan Huong Nguyen

Director, Center for International Law, East Sea Institute,
Diplomatic Academy of Vietnam
Panelist



Hamzah bin Ishak

Deputy Director-General of National Security (Security Management), National
Security Council (NSC), Prime Minister's Department, Malaysia
Panelist

10:45-12:15 – Panel 2

Getting Past Constraints: Ideas to Advance ASEAN's Maritime Security Agenda

Since the 1992 ASEAN Declaration on the South China Sea, ASEAN has been perceived as either ineffective or pivotal in promoting a more rules-based regional maritime order. In 2002, ASEAN and China signed the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the South China Sea (DOC), in which all disputing parties committed to “exercise self-restraint in the conduct of activities that would complicate or escalate disputes... including, among others, refraining from action of inhabiting on the presently uninhabited islands, reefs, shoals, cays, and other features,” and to resolve their differences in a constructive manner. More significantly, the 2002 DOC obligated ASEAN member states and China to work toward concluding an effective Code of Conduct. However, 23 years—and several newly built artificial islands—later, tensions continue to rise, with China now closer than ever to operationalizing its nine-dash line claim. ASEAN's consensus-based approach to

decision-making, known as the "ASEAN Way," has arguably left the bloc ill-equipped to address escalating maritime disputes. This panel will evaluate ASEAN's efforts to promote the rule of law in maritime Southeast Asia and aims to produce actionable policy recommendations for overcoming current limitations.



Dr. Jeffrey Ordaniel

President & CEO, WPS; Associate Professor of International Security,
Tokyo International University

Panel Chair



Prof. Dr. Thitinan Pongsudhirak

Professor of International Relations, Faculty of Political Science,
Chulalongkorn University

Panelist



Dr. Chiew Ping Hoo

Founder, East Asian IR Caucus

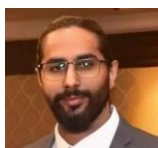
Panelist



Dr. Collin Koh

Senior Fellow, S. Rajaratnam School of International Studies,
Nanyang Technological University

Panelist



Don McLain Gill

Lecturer, Department of International Studies, De La Salle University

Panelist

12:15-13:30 LUNCH

13:45-15:15 – Panel 3

Examining Regional Fish Stocks Management

Fish stocks in ASEAN waters have declined by 70-95% since the 1950s, with catch rates falling by 66-75% over the past two decades, according to the most recent studies by multiple scientific organizations. Activities such as giant clam harvesting, dredging, and the construction of artificial islands have severely damaged over 160 square kilometers of coral reefs. This panel will address the following questions:

- What are the key factors contributing to the collapse of fish stocks?
- How can Southeast Asian states collectively address these critical issues to safeguard the region's human and food security?



Prof. Ma. Carmen Ablan Lagman

Professor of Biology, De La Salle University

Panel Chair



Isara Chanrachkij

Director, Project Planning and Management Division, Training Department,
Southeast Asian Fisheries Development Center (SEAFDC)

Panelist



Dr. Sazlina Salleh

Deputy Director, Center for Policy Research, Universiti Sains Malaysia

Panelist



Dr. Charina Lyn Amedo- Repollo

Assistant Professor, Deputy Director for Research, Marine Science Institute,
University of the Philippines

Panelist



Dr. Chien Thai

Division Chief, Capture Fisheries and Resource Management Department, Research
Institute for Aquaculture Number 3 (RIA3)

Panelist

15:30-17:00 – Panel 4

**Promoting Energy Security, Environmental Protection and Scientific Research in Maritime
Southeast Asia**

Article 123 of the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea obliges states bordering semi-enclosed seas, such as the South China Sea, to cooperate on marine environmental protection. This reflects the interconnected nature of semi-enclosed sea ecosystems, where currents transport marine life and pollution across national boundaries. Additionally, Article 192 of UNCLOS imposes a general duty on all states to "protect and preserve the marine environment." The South China Sea could also secure the region's energy future. This session will address the following questions:

- What are the key factors contributing to marine environmental degradation in Southeast Asian waters?
- What ASEAN mechanisms exist to address marine environmental protection? Are these mechanisms effective? What improvements are needed to enable ASEAN institutions to address the root causes of environmental degradation?
- How can ASEAN member states fully leverage the Marine Scientific Research (MSR) regime enshrined in UNCLOS to enhance marine environmental protection measures?
- Can hydrocarbon resources in the South China Sea help achieve energy security for Southeast Asia?



Neil Silva

Senior Lecturer, University of the Philippines College of Law

Panel Chair



Dr. Sau Pinn "Abe" Woo

Deputy Director, Centre for Marine and Coastal Studies (CEMACS),
Universiti Sains Malaysia

Panelist



Prof. Victor Andres "Dindo" Manhit

CEO and Founder, The Stratbase Group

Panelist

MAY 23, 2025 | FRIDAY

9:00-10:30 – Panel 5

Countering Disinformation and Other Malign Influence Operations

How can governments safeguard their institutions and the public from foreign malign influence operations that seek to confuse their people, poison political discourse, and make outright violations of international law seemingly acceptable and coercion, justifiable?



Richard Heydarian

Senior Lecturer, Master in International Studies, University of the Philippines

Panel Chair



Dr. Chong Ja Ian

Associate Professor of Political Science, National University of Singapore

Panelist



Jonathan Malaya

Assistant Director General, National Security Council

Panelist



Commo. Jay Tarriela

Chief, West Philippine Sea Transparency Group, Philippine Coast Guard

Panelist



Dr. Tricia Yeoh

Associate Professor of Practice, School of Politics and International Relations,
University of Nottingham Malaysia

Panelist

10:45-12:15 – Panel 6

Confidence-Building Measures, Risk Reduction, and Dispute Resolution: A Diplomatic Roundtable

Officials from Indonesia, Malaysia, the Philippines and Vietnam will participate as panelists and address the following questions:

- What is your government's perspective on the negotiations for a Code of Conduct that has lingered for nearly three decades? What are the primary challenges inhibiting its completion, and when can we expect a finalized draft?

- Is ASEAN still the preferred mechanism for ensuring stability and security in the South China Sea?
- What roles do extra-regional mechanisms such as AUKUS, the US-Japan-Philippines trilateral partnership, and the QUAD play in promoting a rules-based maritime order in Southeast Asia? Do you view these mechanisms as undermining ASEAN Centrality or complementing it?



Prof. Renato Cruz De Castro
Distinguished Professor, De La Salle University-Manila
Panel Chair



H.E. Lai Thai Binh
Ambassador of Viet Nam to the Philippines
Panelist



H.E. Agus Widjojo
Ambassador of Indonesia to the Philippines
Panelist



VADM. Alexander Lopez (Ret., AFP)
Spokesperson, National Maritime Council (NMC), Philippines
Panelist



Asec. Marshall Louis Alferez
Assistant Secretary, Maritime and Ocean Affairs Office,
Department of Foreign Affairs, Philippines
Panelist

12:15-13:30 LUNCH

13:45-15:15 – Panel 7

Undersea Cables as Emerging National and Regional Security Challenge

KAS Philippines Special Panel

Subsea cables form the backbone of global telecommunications and the internet, enabling the essential and day-to-day functions across governments, businesses, and broader society. In 2010, the United Nations described submarine communication cables as “critical communications infrastructure” and “vitally important to the global economy and the national security of all states.” Given the crucial role of subsea cables in the modern world and the challenging environment in which they are situated, these vital infrastructures are inherently vulnerable to a wide range of risks, both intentional and accidental. In addition, the recent uptick in damage reports related to subsea cables in the Baltic Sea and Taiwan has heightened concerns of sabotage amid intensifying geopolitical conflicts. Within this context, this panel will assess this emerging maritime security issue and address the following questions:

- What is the current security status of undersea cables traversing regional waters?
- What is the role of maritime Southeast Asia in the global subsea cable network?
- What institutional mechanisms exist within ASEAN to protect subsea cables from threats such as espionage, sabotage, and accidental damage?

- What policy gaps remain, and what challenges must be overcome?
- What lessons can be drawn from similar incidents in other regions such as the Baltic Sea and Taiwan?



Patrick Zoll

Correspondent for Geopolitics in the Indo-Pacific, Neue Zürcher Zeitung

Panel Chair



Dr. Su Wai Mon

Research Fellow, Centre for International Law, National University of Singapore

Panelist



Muhammad Waffaa Kharisma

Researcher, Department of International Relations, CSIS Indonesia

Panelist



Dr. Bich Tran

Research Fellow, YCAPS; Nonresident Fellow, WPS

Panelist

15:30-16:45 – Panel 8

Law Enforcement at Sea: Strengthening Regional Coast Guard Cooperation

Coast Guard organizations have emerged as the primary agencies for maintaining maritime safety and security in Southeast Asia, particularly in sea areas within national jurisdictions. In recent years, however, the increasing prevalence of "gray zone" coercion at sea has expanded the role of coast guards beyond constabulary maritime forces. They now play a crucial role in ensuring littoral states in the South China Sea maintain jurisdiction over their territorial seas, EEZs, and continental shelves in accordance with international law. This session will address the following questions:

- How are regional Coast Guard organizations responding to the increasing use of "gray zone" coercion in Southeast Asian waters?
- What challenges hinder closer Coast Guard cooperation in Southeast Asia?
- What steps can be taken to ensure that the emerging ASEAN Coast Guard Forum evolves into an impactful institution that promotes adherence to international law and fosters effective regional cooperation to address maritime challenges?



Dr. Rahman Yaacob

Research Fellow, Lowy Institute

Panel Chair



RADM. Samuel Kowaas

Executive Secretary, Indonesia Coast Guard (BAKAMLA)

Panelist



Senior Colonel Khanh Van Vu (Ret, Vietnamese People's Army)

Former Director, Department of International Studies, Institute for Defence Strategy,
Ministry of National Defence of Vietnam

Panelist



Commo. Jay Tarriela

Chief, West Philippine Sea Transparency Group, Philippine Coast Guard

Panelist

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