



## **BACKGROUND**

The use of the sea has never been more critical for nation-states in Southeast Asia and beyond. The 21<sup>st</sup> century strategic environment provides opportunities for states to flourish brought by globalization and rapid technological advancements in the maritime domains led by great powers including the United States and China. However, the gaps remain ambiguous in reconciling diverging national interests while confronting the need to address common interests at sea—global supply chain, access to energy sources, blue ocean economy and food security, ensuring freedom of passageways, access to chokepoint, respect for maritime traffic, and securing sea lanes and costs, among others.

What states do at sea matters for their people on land; what others do at sea also matters for other people on land. Hence, collaboration on areas of convergence matters.

## **INTRODUCTION**

1. Asia Collective 2023 was held on 22 November 2023 from 8.30 am to 1pm at Fairmont Makati, Manila, the Philippines. The event was attended by 79 ticketholders.
2. The purpose of Asia Collective was to:
  - a. Explore the intricate interplay between regional development and maritime security, recognizing that they are inextricably linked.
  - b. Examine the importance of regional cooperation and collaboration in tackling shared challenges, such as economic inequality, and geopolitical tensions.
  - c. Delve into the pressing issue of maritime security, encompassing both traditional and non-traditional threats; from terrorism to conflicts.
  - d. Embrace the diversity of perspectives, expertise, and experiences that the panellists bring to the table.
  - e. Deepen friendships, extend networks and explore business opportunities.

## **AUDIENCE METRICS**

3. A total of 91 participants registered for Asia Collective 2023, a free-to-attend event, via the dedicated registration form and Eventbrite. The event saw a total of 79 participants, including 12 walk-ins, of which;
- a. 17 were from overseas, including Australia, China, France, India, Indonesia, Malaysia, Mongolia, Singapore, Taiwan, UK and USA.
  - b. 8 were from embassies and government/diplomatic organisations.
  - c. 4 were from international media and press.
  - d. Experts and academics, researchers, community and social advocates, business and industry leaders and international organisations, in order of attendance numbers, made up the bulk of the participants.

#### **SPEAKERS PROFILE AND TOPICS**

4. Hon. Jesus Gary S. Domingo  
Undersecretary for Civilian Security & Consular Affairs, Department of Foreign Affairs



#### *Keynote Speech*

In his keynote speech, Hon. Domingo addressed crucial aspects of maritime security, advocating for the creation of more safe spaces for international dialogue. He emphasised the necessity of diverse perspectives from different nations to foster comprehensive discussions on maritime security. As he encapsulated the Philippines' position in this context, he underscored the nation's unique archipelagic nature, characterised by vast islands. Hon. Domingo highlighted the imperative for the government to strengthen policies addressing unlawful acts, emphasising the critical role of research and efficiency in this pursuit. To enhance maritime security, he proposed leveraging advanced technologies such as space science and artificial intelligence, demonstrating a forward-looking approach.

Furthermore, he emphasised the need to incentivise scientists to contribute to this crucial domain and urged a revisit and implementation of relevant agreements.

Hon. Domingo acknowledged the proactive engagement of ASEAN member states in collaborating with partners and key players, recognising the collective responsibility in ensuring regional maritime security. A notable aspect of his address was the call to comprehensively address anomalies in maritime security. He advocated for the proposal and

assessment of robust security measures, coupled with a thorough examination of their impact on land. This holistic approach aimed to address not only the challenges at sea but also the broader implications on the territories and communities adjacent to maritime zones. Hon. Domingo's keynote speech thus illuminated a vision for collaborative and technologically advanced solutions to fortify maritime security in the Philippines and beyond.

5. Dr. Yan Yan  
Director, Research Center for Oceans Law and Policy Director,  
National Institute for South China Sea Studies (NISCSS)

### *South China Sea 2023: Achievement and Turbulence*

In her presentation, Dr. Yan provided a detailed overview of the South China Sea conundrum in 2023, highlighting the crucial role of the United States as a non-claimant state but actively engaged with claimant states, contributing to a balanced dynamic. She emphasised the complexity of the South China Sea dispute, distinguishing between confrontation and cooperation, particularly noting the negotiations between President Marcos and China earlier in the year, which expanded beyond tensions in the Scarborough Shoal.



Dr. Yan delved into the pervasive issue of misinformation and fake news surrounding the South China Sea, lamenting the prevalence of distorted narratives overshadowing the true story of cooperation between China and the Philippines in the Scarborough Shoal. The presentation outlined the layers of the South China Sea dispute, categorizing them into navigational issues, jurisdiction of maritime space, and territorial sovereignty, each presenting distinct challenges and complexities.

China's claims and policies in the South China Sea were examined, with a focus on an international-law-based order. Dr. Yan scrutinised the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) and regional arrangements, shedding light on the challenges posed by vague language in these agreements. Contrary to common perceptions, she explained the legal points that influence China's decisions not to follow or join the UNCLOS.

The presentation addressed China's stance on the arbitration, emphasizing the agreement with the Philippines to settle disputes through bilateral negotiation and the contention that the essence of the subject-matter is a territorial sovereignty dispute, which is excluded by China's 2006 Declaration. Dr. Yan discussed the evolution of regional rules and order over about 20 years, including the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties (DOC) and the ongoing negotiations for the Code of Conduct (COC), with an optimistic outlook on concluding it in three years.

The United States emerged as a pivotal player in the South China Sea, influencing the dynamics through military, diplomatic, legal, and economic means. Dr. Yan concluded by outlining the way forward, emphasising the need for political will from the Philippine government to establish a Bilateral Consultative Mechanism (BCM) on international law, including UNCLOS, DOC, COC, and negotiations involving all parties. Her presentation provided a nuanced and insightful analysis of the complex dynamics in the South China Sea region.

6. RADM (Ret.) Prof. Dr. Ir. Supartono  
Rector, Huang Tuah University



*Managing Potential Conflict in the South China Sea*

Prof. Supartono elucidated the intricate dynamics surrounding the South China Sea (SCS), offering a comprehensive analysis of its strategic importance. Emphasising the critical factors of resources, sea routes, power projection, and the potential for anti-access and area denial, the admiral delved into the complex web of territorial claims involving the People's Republic of China (PRC), Taiwan, Brunei, Malaysia, the Philippines, and Vietnam. With a keen eye on the Indo-Pacific concept as a catalyst for heightened tensions, Prof. Supartono highlighted the escalating military activities in the SCS and the East China Sea (ECS), spurred by the US Indo-Pacific vision, the ASEAN concept on Indo-Pacific, the US-PRC trade war, and regionalized war concepts between the US and the PRC.

Navigating through the SCS conflict vortex, Prof. Supartono explained the profound impact on ASEAN, emphasizing the significance of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties in the SCS, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific, and the organization's encirclement by the Trans-Pacific partnership agreement involving QUAD-Five Power Defense Arrangement (FPDA)-AUKUS Trilateral Partnership. Prof. Supartono underscored the effectiveness of extra-regional platforms such as ASEAN plus 3, East Asia Summit, ASEAN Regional Forum, ASEAN Defense Ministers' Meeting Plus, and ASEAN Maritime Forum.

Highlighting the global ramifications of the SCS conflict, the admiral detailed disruptions such as the Indo-Pacific evolving into a battleground between the US and PRC, heightened global connectivity rivalry, emerging hegemonic conflict flashpoints, and disruptions to global supply chains through Sea Lines of Communication (SLOC) and Sea Lines of Transport (SLOT). Firmly positioning Indonesia as a non-claimant state with jurisdiction over the Natuna area, Prof. Supartono stressed adherence to the UNCLOS and the rejection of PRC claims.

Advocating for ASEAN's role in maintaining consistency and strict observance of the Declaration on the Conduct of Parties, the acceleration of the Code of Conduct formation, and fostering concrete cooperation in maritime scientific research, search and rescue

operations, environmental protection, transnational crime, and safety of navigation and communication at sea, RADM SUPARTONO concluded by urging the improvement of ASEAN centrality and its forums to effectively mitigate regional tensions in the volatile South China Sea.

7. Mr. Derek Grossman  
Senior Defense Analyst RAND Corporation

*The Philippines, Vietnam, and the US Indo-Pacific Strategy: Partnerships and Potentials*

Mr. Grossman dissected the nuances of the United States' perspective on the Indo-Pacific region, shedding light on the intricacies of geopolitical dynamics. He underscored the historical significance of the term "Asia-Pacific" from the US viewpoint, emphasizing its focus on the Asian landmass rather than the central focus on the Pacific. Highlighting China as a business adversary rather than a friend, Mr. Grossman critiqued the Indo-Pacific concept for its exclusion of India, which plays a pivotal role in the region. Drawing from former Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe's vision, Mr. Grossman advocated for a more inclusive Indo-Pacific that extends beyond the Asian landmass to include the east and west Indian Ocean, thereby involving Africa.



Examining varying geographic definitions across countries, Mr. Grossman identified a consistent principle in US objectives for the region, spanning from the Trump to the Biden administration. He outlined the Trump administration's goals, including respect for sovereignty, peaceful dispute resolution, fair trade, and adherence to international rules. Transitioning to the Biden administration's goals, he highlighted the focus on advancing a free and open Indo-Pacific, building connections, driving regional prosperity, bolstering security, and enhancing resilience to transnational threats.

Mr. Grossman then delved into the US perception of China as the primary competitor seeking to reshape the international order. He emphasised China's ambitions to establish a sphere of influence in the Indo-Pacific and become the world's leading power across economic, diplomatic, military, and technological domains. Using the example of China's coercive gray zone tactics against the Philippines at Second Thomas Shoal, Mr. Grossman detailed military-grade laser use, water cannon incidents, and menacing ship maneuvers, raising concerns about potential future escalations, including a full blockade or detainment of crew members.

The presentation also explored opportunities for the Philippines within the strong US-Philippines alliance, evidenced by the reversal of Duterte's termination of the Visiting Forces Agreement (VFA) and the expansion of the Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement

(EDCA). Mr. Grossman highlighted joint military exercises and engagements, emphasising the potential for continued collaboration to keep the region "free and open" from coercion.

Turning to Vietnam, Mr. Grossman discussed Biden's September 2023 visit to elevate relations to a "Comprehensive Strategic Partnership." While Vietnam has been reserved about endorsing the US Indo-Pacific strategy, actions in Hanoi suggest a recognition of benefits in strengthening ties with Washington. The presentation acknowledged uncertainties in the volatile global landscape, indicating that the US security commitment to the Philippines and the strategic partnership with Vietnam may be subject to change. Despite this, the Biden administration's unwavering focus on the Indo-Pacific, amidst current crises, poses questions about its capacity to sustain this priority in the face of potential shifts, especially if Trump is elected in 2024, which could significantly alter American involvement in the region.

8. Assoc. Prof. Dr. Hazmi Rusli  
Lecturer, Universiti Sains Islam Malaysia

*The Potential Implications of U.S. Indo-Pacific Strategy on Southeast Asia's Crucial Lines of Communication: A Study of the Straits of Malacca and Singapore and the South China Sea*

Assoc. Prof. Hazmi illuminated Malaysia's cautious approach to the Indo-Pacific strategy, characterised by a deliberate and neutral stance rather than an explicit policy commitment. The focal points of his discussion revolved around two critical issues: the potential implications of AUKUS, an enhanced



trilateral security partnership with Australia, the United Kingdom and the United States, and the broader effects of transit passage in the region. Assoc. Prof. Hazmi emphasised the paramount importance of ensuring that transit passage remains unimpeded by littoral states, underscoring the necessity for all nations to adhere to the Law of the Sea Convention (LOSC) with due consideration to navigational rights versus sovereignty and sovereign rights.

The presentation delved into the specifics of AUKUS, highlighting the need for monitoring underwater nuclear-powered vessels in the region while emphasizing the imperative for nations to respect each other's sovereignty and interests. Assoc. Prof. Hazmi pointed out the evolving nature of maritime challenges, particularly with the presence of nuclear-powered vessels, and stressed the importance of adapting regulations, considering the age of the LOSC drafted in the 1970s.

Advocating for states to have more regulatory powers in monitoring transit for maritime security, Assoc. Prof. Hazmi addressed the nuances of passage through canals, clarifying that it is not subjected to the transit passage regime under the LOSC, thereby allowing for the imposition of transit tariffs. The potential opening of the Thai Canal emerged as a strategic proposal that could contribute to reducing sea robbery and piracy attacks in the region.

Additionally, the concept of a land bridge, proposed by Thailand, added another dimension to the discourse, hinting at alternative solutions for regional connectivity and security.

In essence, Assoc. Prof Hazmi's presentation showcased a nuanced understanding of Malaysia's strategic positioning, dissecting the implications of AUKUS and emphasizing the delicate balance required in upholding navigational rights while safeguarding the marine environment, especially in the context of nuclear-powered vessels. His insights on regulatory powers, transit passage, and regional proposals like the Thai Canal and land bridge provided a comprehensive view of Malaysia's considerations within the complex dynamics of the Indo-Pacific.

9. Panel discussion  
moderated by Dr. Chester B. Cabalza  
President and Co-Founder of the International Development and Security Cooperation

The panel delved into intricate aspects of regional dynamics, reflecting a mosaic of perspectives and considerations. The recognition of the Trump Administration's pursuit of enhancement and alliances underscored the strategic complexity shaping the regional landscape. The acknowledgment of persistent challenges in maritime security, particularly crimes in straits, emphasized the ongoing need for collaborative efforts to mitigate such issues, highlighting the interconnected nature of security concerns in the region.



China's emphasis on the cooperative message sent by the APEC Summit and the call for U.S. neutrality laid bare the intricate diplomacy at play. The U.S.'s plea for a resumption of military talks with China highlighted the importance of maintaining open channels of communication to navigate differences and build understanding.

Divergent views on President Marcos Jr.'s stance in the South China Sea illuminated the complexity of regional perspectives. Malaysia's advocacy for a multilateral Code of Conduct (COC) reflected the importance of inclusivity and shared responsibilities, while the U.S.'s

expression of distrust in China's intentions underscored the underlying tensions in the geopolitical landscape. Indonesia's emphasis on ASEAN centrality in the COC discussion reinforced the significance of regional cooperation and frameworks.

The nuanced perspectives on maritime rights, with China asserting rights beyond UNCLOS and emphasising the inadequacy of UNCLOS in addressing contemporary complexities, revealed the evolving nature of international maritime law and the challenges in adapting to new geopolitical realities.

Various regional concerns, including freedom of navigation, the AUKUS partnership, and China's efforts to combat fake news, reflected the intricacies of contemporary geopolitical challenges. The clarification from the U.S. that its Enhanced Defense Cooperation Agreement (EDCA) sites were not intended for hostile actions against China but rather focused on humanitarian assistance and disaster relief showcased the delicate balance between military preparedness and humanitarian considerations.

The consensus among Malaysia, Indonesia, and China on ASEAN's principle of non-interference, particularly in economic matters, highlighted the importance of respecting each nation's sovereignty while fostering regional cooperation. China's ongoing coordination with Southeast Asian countries for maritime infrastructure underscored the proactive role it plays in regional maritime security within the ASEAN framework.

The relationship between the U.S. and the Malaysian region, characterised by Indonesia's perspective as viewing the U.S. as a friend and ally, brought attention to the intricate web of diplomatic ties. The call for a new discussion on trade agreements, particularly in the absence of the U.S. in the Comprehensive and Progressive Agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership (CPTPP), raised questions about the evolving economic dynamics in the region.

The emphasis on crisis management for long-term peace, particularly China's perspective on enduring regional relationships, highlighted the strategic imperative of fostering understanding among neighboring nations. The consistent theme of ASEAN centrality throughout the discussion underscored the pivotal role of ASEAN in regional stability and cooperation. In conclusion, the importance of actions to de-escalate tensions and the role of frequent access and visits in fostering relationships, as emphasised by Malaysia, underscored the practical steps needed to maintain peace and stability in the region.

## **PARTNERS**

10. International Development and Security Cooperation (IDSC). A non-profit policy research organisation dedicated to advancing global development towards a more secure world converging holistic, strategic, and progressive discourses on transnational development and regional security issues.

IDSC's mission is to help advance Philippine national interest in international development and security cooperation with other countries through collaboration, education, research,

and training aimed at becoming an eminent think tank in the Indo-Pacific region. IDSC helps policymakers make decisions based on evidence-based research and for academics to find an alternative, balance, and independent platform through shared intelligent conversation with premiere analysts and scientists across the globe.

11. Semar Sentinel. A consulting firm specialised in security, defence and aerospace sectors. As the region is increasingly subject to security dilemmas and rising uncertainty, Semar Sentinel offers services and solutions to partners and client, to get a better understanding of opportunities they might encounter and threats they might be confronted with.

Semar Sentinel sheds light on security, defence and aerospace issues and matters in Indonesia. They carefully curate information that are relevant and analyses them deeply to sense make the intricacies.

12. M Group Asia. An established business solution service provider to a comprehensive range of corporations to SMEs, MNCs, local and overseas companies and individuals, combining on-the-ground leg work with top-level strategic insights to deliver the highest quality analysis and value added solutions.

M Group Asia converges the highest level of strategic input with ground sentiments. Their experts spans across Asia covering all industries and sectors. They provide unique insights into how governments, economies, companies and individuals in the Asia-Pacific converge and make decisions that impact businesses.

13. United Peace Keepers Federal Council. Their objectives include collaborating with UN Agencies and other International Organizations for supporting the Peacekeeping missions and mandates of the United Nations, engaging and promoting Peace Building process globally.

They Inform and affirm the general public of the activities, importance and values of the United Nations missions, projects and initiatives for change that are being implemented by the United Nations or are ought to be implemented in the future, and that are of interest globally. Through their activities, the principles of understanding, respect, tolerance, peaceful coexistence and interconnectivity of societies irrespective of gender, race, nationality, ethnicity or religious affiliation are promoted in order to establish new contacts and joint action towards solving contemporary problems in to ultimately creating a peaceful world.

As part of their UN-mandated responsibility to help prevent, mitigate, and resolve violent conflict abroad, the UNPKFC joins the efforts being undertaken by civil society organizations, elected officials and governments across the world to address issues of justice, diversity, equity, and inclusion in the field of peace-building. UNPKFC is fully committed to the efforts and reckoning within peacebuilding, and works collaboratively with partner organisations, experts, and leaders from all walks of society to actively promote justice, equity, diversity and inclusion in all aspects of conflict prevention, mitigation and resolution.

14. Mirage Defence. The leading provider of comprehensive defence solutions, specialising in consultancy services, product distribution, and representation for defence and security industries. They work closely with government agencies, military organisations, and private sector clients to deliver tailored strategies and solutions that meet the ever-evolving challenges of today's defence landscape.

Mirage Defence's consulting services encompass a wide range of areas, including threat assessment, risk analysis, strategic planning, and policy development. In addition to consulting expertise, they are trusted distributors and representatives of top-quality defence and security products and service.

**CONCLUSION**

15. Overall, the inaugural Asia Collective 2023 was a successful international and track two diplomacy forum on Maritime Security. The intense exchange of ideas presented and opposed were substantive during the open forum; The inextricable link between regional development and maritime security was reinforced, the importance of regional cooperation and collaboration in tackling shared challenges, such as economic inequality, and geopolitical tensions, was underscored and the emerging challenge of social media as a pressing non-traditional threat was addressed. Most importantly, friendships were strengthened and networks were grown, promoting business opportunities, thus contributing to a safer and stable region.

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