



**INSTITUTIONALIZING THE ASEAN  
COAST GUARD FORUM: ADVANCING  
REGIONAL MARITIME SECURITY  
COOPERATION**

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*Photo: Thai Navy warships. Source: Royal Thai Navy*

### **The Roles of the Coast Guard in the Maritime Domain**

The Coast Guard is a national agency that plays a vital role in safeguarding a country's maritime domain, including its seas and coastal areas. Within the ASEAN maritime sphere, the most pressing challenges faced by coast guards are [non-traditional security threats](#), such as illegal, unreported, and unregulated fishing, human and drug trafficking, marine pollution, piracy and maritime armed robbery, terrorism, and illegal migration.

Due to its strategic geographical position as an important conduit in international trade routes—connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans through key waterways like the Strait of Malacca, Sulu Sea, Celebes Sea, and the South China Sea—these areas have become a maritime flashpoint in the ASEAN region. The complexity of maritime security is further compounded by China's growing assertiveness in recent years, particularly in the South China Sea, through the deployment of its navy, coast guard, and maritime militia. This has led to [increasing incidents](#), particularly clashes with the Philippine Coast Guard.

The Coast Guard performs four primary [roles](#) in the maritime domain. First, maritime safety involves ensuring the secure navigation of vessels and cargo within ASEAN waters. Second, marine conservation focuses on protecting the marine environment and preserving biodiversity. Third, maritime governance entails enforcing national laws and international maritime regulations to maintain order at sea. Lastly, law enforcement includes addressing violations through direct actions, such as expelling foreign vessels that breach territorial waters and conducting search and rescue operations.

As maritime threats evolve, the Coast Guard's responsibilities have expanded beyond non-traditional threats to include patrolling disputed areas in the South China Sea. However, this does not imply that coast guards are [replacing naval forces](#). Instead, coast guards are deployed as instruments of de-escalation in maritime disputes, offering a non-militarized alternative. While navies defend against state actors and uphold sovereignty, coast guards primarily address non-traditional security threats that involve civilians. This distinction is also reflected in operational appearances: naval ships are painted grey, while coast guard vessels are typically white.

### **Regional Cooperation: The ASEAN Coast Guard Forum**

To strengthen regional coordination, Indonesia's Maritime Security Agency (Bakamla) initiated the establishment of the ASEAN Coast Guard Forum (ACF) in 2022. This platform aims to enhance cooperation among coast guards and maritime law enforcement agencies of ASEAN member states by

creating a regional dialogue mechanism to collectively address maritime security threats.

[The first ACF](#), hosted by Indonesia in 2022, involved eight ASEAN countries and produced the ASEAN Coast Guard Declaration, signalling a unified commitment to regional maritime security.

[The second forum](#), also held in Indonesia in 2023, was attended by six ASEAN members and defined the mandate of the ACF Working Group, which includes information sharing, capacity building, confidence-building activities, operational cooperation, and regular meetings.

[The third forum](#), hosted by the Philippines in 2024, reviewed progress on cooperative activities and foundational documents. Currently, the ACF is in its developmental phase, finalizing the Terms of Reference (TOR) and a Concept Paper for submission to the ASEAN Secretariat to formalize the forum under the ASEAN framework. During the latest Technical Expert Group Meeting in May 2025, coast guard representatives from ASEAN states provided input on these documents. The documents were reviewed and refined at [the fourth ACF High-Level Meeting](#) in Thailand last June. While not yet institutionalized at the ASEAN level, the ACF has already been active, conducting regular morning briefings for information exchange, hosting high-level and technical meetings, facilitating officer exchange programs, organizing port visits, and holding joint exercises.

The ACF exemplifies a collective and non-provocative strategy to address maritime safety and security, distinct from the military posture of navies. It provides a [soft diplomacy](#) platform to build trust, enhance cooperation, and foster confidence among ASEAN coast guards. The forum also supports strategic and operational collaboration through knowledge-sharing and capacity-building programs.

### **Institutionalization and Strategic Relevance**

Efforts to institutionalize the ACF within the broader ASEAN framework reflect a strong regional willingness on the importance of international cooperation in maritime security. Given the absence of a dedicated mechanism to manage coast guard-level interactions in ASEAN, the ACF is expected to fill this gap and [complement](#)

existing regional maritime initiatives, such as the ASEAN Maritime Forum, ASEAN Ministerial Meeting on Transnational Crime, ASEAN Maritime Transport Working Group, and ASEAN Working Group on Coastal and Marine Environment.

At present, the ACF does not involve coast guard forces from external partners, as it prioritizes strengthening intra-ASEAN cooperation. However, once the forum is well-established, it may open up to collaboration with external partners. This would mirror the evolution of the ASEAN Defence Ministers' Meeting (ADMM) into ADMM-Plus, which can bring major and middle powers to pursue constructive dialogues. Such a development could help ASEAN remain a central and relevant player in the international theatre.

Considering the varying national priorities across ASEAN member states, the key challenge lies in achieving collective commitment to advance the ACF both strategically and practically. Once formalized, the ACF has the potential to strengthen ASEAN's solidarity and centrality, supporting both national and regional interests in the maritime domain. By safeguarding maritime security and safety, the forum would also indirectly uphold state sovereignty across the region.