

**THE ROLE OF ACTORS NETWORK IN THE REGIONAL COOPERATION:
A CASE STUDY OF THE ASEAN MARITIME OUTLOOK**

**Dhani Akbar¹, Wayu Eko Yudiatmaja^{2*}, Firman Firman², Kustiawan Kustiawan³,
Teguh Setiandika Igi⁴**

¹Department of International Relations, Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji

²Department of Public Administration, Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji

³Department of Government, Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji

⁴Department of Sociology, Universitas Maritim Raja Ali Haji

*Corresponding Author: wayuguci@umrah.ac.id

ABSTRACT

The ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) represents a strategic initiative designed to strengthen maritime cooperation in Southeast Asia; however, its effectiveness largely depends on the dynamics of inter-actor networks involved in its formulation and implementation. This study analyzes the engagement and relationships among various actors—including states, donor agencies, international organizations, research institutions, and civil society—using an actor-network analysis approach and secondary data drawn from official documents, partner institution reports, and academic publications. The findings indicate that ASEAN's maritime cooperation operates in a multi-level and collaborative manner, with Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore playing dominant roles, while non-state actors significantly contribute to the transnational dimension of maritime policy. The results suggest that the effectiveness of ASEAN's maritime governance is shaped less by formal institutional structures than by the strength of adaptive and inclusive actor coordination, thereby enriching the discourse on contemporary regionalism from the perspectives of political science and international relations.

Keywords: ASEAN Maritime Outlook, Actor-Network Analysis, Maritime Cooperation, Regionalism.

ABSTRAK

ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) merupakan inisiatif strategis yang dirancang untuk memperkuat kerja sama maritim di Asia Tenggara; namun, keefektifannya sangat bergantung pada dinamika jaringan antar-aktor yang terlibat dalam perumusan dan pelaksanaannya. Studi ini menganalisis keterlibatan dan hubungan di antara berbagai aktor—termasuk negara, lembaga donor, organisasi internasional, lembaga penelitian, dan masyarakat sipil—dengan menggunakan pendekatan analisis jaringan aktor serta data sekunder yang diambil dari dokumen resmi, laporan lembaga mitra, dan publikasi akademis. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa kerja sama maritim ASEAN beroperasi secara multi-level dan kolaboratif, dengan Indonesia, Vietnam, dan Singapura memainkan peran dominan, sementara aktor non-negara memberikan kontribusi signifikan terhadap dimensi transnasional kebijakan maritim. Hasil penelitian menyarankan bahwa efektivitas tata kelola maritim ASEAN lebih dipengaruhi oleh kekuatan koordinasi aktor yang adaptif dan inklusif daripada struktur kelembagaan formal, sehingga memperkaya wacana tentang regionalisme kontemporer dari perspektif ilmu politik dan hubungan internasional.

Kata kunci: Prospek Maritim ASEAN, Analisis Jaringan Aktor, Kerja Sama Maritim, Regionalisme.

INTRODUCTION

Over the past few decades, the maritime sector has increasingly become a central focus in Southeast Asia's development agenda. The region is not only endowed with abundant marine resources but also occupies a strategic position along global shipping routes, making it vital to economic growth,

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153

Indexed



SINTA 4



connectivity, and regional security stability. As a regional organization, ASEAN has responded to these dynamics by formulating a range of initiatives, one of which is the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO)—a strategic document intended to guide and coordinate maritime cooperation among its member states. Nevertheless, although the AMO was designed to embody ASEAN’s collective commitment, a critical question arises: to what extent do the diverse actors involved influence its formulation and implementation processes? Existing literature provides an initial understanding of this issue. Studies by Shen (2023) and Yap and Yang (2024) emphasize the importance of maritime infrastructure development and policy integration in ASEAN, while Li (2023) and Caballero-Anthony (2022) focus more on maritime security and strategic dimensions. However, much of the existing research remains centered on major states or formal actors within the international system, leaving limited analysis on how cross-sectoral interactions—among state, private, civil society, and research actors—shape the direction and effectiveness of ASEAN’s maritime policies.

In the context of contemporary regionalism, policymaking is no longer confined to state actors alone. The formulation and implementation of regional policies often involve a constellation of actors connected through complex cooperation networks. In the case of the AMO, informal elements play a particularly significant role, ranging from technical meetings and donor support to the participation of think tanks and civil society organizations. Nevertheless, these interactions have not been systematically documented or analyzed in a framework capable of explaining how the relationships and interests among these actors interconnect and influence ASEAN’s maritime policy direction (Magunna, 2024).

The importance of a cross-actor approach in regional cooperation is also underscored that ASEAN’s weak institutionalization often undermines the consistency of its centrality principle (Qiao-Franco et al., 2025). In the context of the AMO, this challenge becomes even more relevant, as the document itself is non-binding and primarily dependent on the voluntary commitments of member states. Therefore, the success of the AMO is largely determined by the extent to which coordination and networks among actors can be effectively developed and sustained over time.

Furthermore, the ASEAN Outlook on the Indo-Pacific highlights the need for inclusive, open, and interconnected maritime cooperation. However, the realization of these principles is often hindered by disparities in capacity, national priorities, and levels of participation among ASEAN member states (Southgate, 2025). Further argues that the success of ASEAN’s maritime policy is driven less by institutional structures and more by the strength of relationships among stakeholders (Roozee et al., 2024). Hence, it becomes essential to shift analytical attention from institutional structures toward the dynamics of actor networks that are more flexible, adaptive, and context-sensitive.

Preliminary findings of this study indicate that cooperation within the AMO framework is far from uniform. Countries such as Indonesia, Vietnam, and Singapore tend to be more proactive and vocal in shaping the regional maritime agenda, while others show limited engagement. The involvement of non-state actors—such as donor agencies (e.g., JICA and ADB), international organizations (e.g., IMO), and regional research centers—further suggests that AMO’s policy formulation process is more collaborative than its formal documentation reflects. However, there has yet to be a systematic mapping of how these inter-actor relationships function, both horizontally (among states) and vertically (across different governance levels involving states, organizations, and civil society).

Uncovering these network dynamics presents methodological challenges. Limited access to primary data—such as meeting records or internal correspondence—restricts the ability to observe communication processes directly. As an alternative, this research employs secondary data analysis based on official documents, partner reports, and relevant academic publications. Although this approach is not free from interpretive bias, it enables the construction of an analytical framework that identifies actor typologies and their relational patterns within ASEAN’s maritime cooperation context.

Accordingly, this study offers a novel contribution by applying an actor-network analysis (ANA) approach to examine the dynamics of regional cooperation through the AMO framework. This perspective

not only enriches the theoretical discourse in Southeast Asian international relations but also provides practical insights for developing maritime policies that are more inclusive, responsive, and collaborative. In the long term, a deeper understanding of inter-actor networks could serve as a key foundation for strengthening ASEAN's capacity as a regional actor capable of collectively addressing maritime challenges in a sustainable manner.

METHODS

This study employed a qualitative research methodology centered on systematic secondary data analysis to examine the configuration and interactions of actors operating within the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) framework. In the absence of direct access to primary empirical materials—such as internal diplomatic communications, closed-session records, or confidential policy drafts—the research draws upon an extensive corpus of publicly available textual sources. These include official ASEAN documents (e.g., declarations, work plans, and summit statements), reports issued by multilateral institutions (e.g., the International Maritime Organization and the Asian Development Bank), publications from bilateral donor agencies (notably the Japan International Cooperation Agency), outputs from regional think tanks, and peer-reviewed academic literature on Southeast Asian regionalism and maritime governance. This curated body of secondary data serves as the empirical foundation for reconstructing the institutional and discursive landscape of maritime cooperation in ASEAN.

Guided by the theoretical tenets of Actor-Network Theory (ANT), the study utilizes a qualitative analytical framework to trace and categorize the heterogeneous actors—state and non-state—that populate the AMO ecosystem, as well as to delineate the relational patterns that underpin policy formulation and implementation. Through iterative thematic and discourse analysis, the research identifies recurring roles, alliances, and asymmetries within the network, thereby illuminating both horizontal interactions among member states and vertical linkages across transnational governance tiers. While the reliance on secondary sources inevitably entails certain interpretive constraints, particularly regarding unspoken power dynamics or informal negotiations, this methodological strategy enables a theoretically informed, empirically grounded reconstruction of the cooperative architecture surrounding the AMO. In doing so, the study advances a nuanced understanding of how actor networks co-constitute regional maritime governance in Southeast Asia.

DISCUSSION

Regime Theory

Regime Theory remains a key framework in International Relations for explaining cooperation among sovereign states under conditions of international anarchy. Scholars highlight that regimes consist of “sets of implicit or explicit principles, norms, rules, and decision-making procedures around which actors' expectations converge in a given issue-area.” Hofmann and Yeo (2024) in its contemporary evolution, analyses emphasise regime complexity—that is, overlapping institutional arrangements among states—rather than simple, single-regime models. For example, Abbott present the notion of “regime complexes” in global governance: “The signature feature of twenty-first-century international cooperation is arguably not the regime but the regime complex” (Abbott & Faude, 2022).

From the regime-theoretical vantage point, the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) can be understood as a *soft maritime regime* within the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) framework (Mulyani, 2025). The AMO articulates shared principles such as inclusivity, connectivity, sustainability, and collective maritime security, while remaining non-binding and consensual in nature. Thus the AMO aligns with regime theory's precepts: it does not impose coercive obligations but institutionalises common expectations among states. Yet, by interpreting regime theory through the lens of regime complexity, one recognises how the AMO interacts with multiple sector-specific initiatives and overlapping institutional arrangements (e.g., maritime transport, security, blue economy)—illustrating a complex regime

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155

Indexed



SINTA 4

PKP|INDEX



environment rather than a monolithic regime (Langlet & Vadrot, 2024).

Nevertheless, regime theory also provides a critique: the non-binding, consensus-based nature of the AMO implies limitations in enforcement and uniform compliance. As regime complexity studies highlight, overlapping institutional frameworks may create fragmentation, variable implementation, and uneven compliance across members (Henning, 2023). In the ASEAN context, this translates into reliance on the political will, administrative capacity, and inter-state trust of individual member states—factors that vary widely. Therefore, regime theory not only assists in conceptualising the AMO’s normative and procedural role, but also in understanding its structural vulnerabilities within regional maritime governance (Pratt, 2023).

Network Governance Theory

Network Governance Theory emphasises policy coordination through horizontally structured, multi-actor networks rather than hierarchical control. Governance networks consist of interdependent but operationally autonomous actors—public, private, civil society—linked by negotiations, information exchange, and trust-based interactions (George et al., 2024). Within the ASEAN maritime cooperation architecture, the AMO exemplifies network governance: state actors (ASEAN Member States via foreign ministries and maritime agencies) and institutional nodes (e.g., the Senior Officials Meeting on Maritime Issues – SOM; the ASEAN Maritime Forum – AMF) serve as formal coordination hubs, while non-state actors (think tanks, maritime universities, external dialogue partners like the EU, Japan, Australia) contribute data, technical support and normative inputs. This constellation of actors evidences a hybrid, multi-level governance network, where formal inter-governmental coordination co-exists with informal, knowledge-based participation. The network governance perspective helps explain how policy coordination happens through relational linkages, mutual adjustment, and shared learning rather than through command-and-control structures.

However, network governance theory also draws attention to structural vulnerabilities: networks may lack formal mechanisms for binding decision-making; they rely heavily on trust, communication, and shared understanding—which may be uneven across members (Andana et al., 2026). Issues of legitimacy, accountability, and effectiveness arise, especially when actors differ in capacity or engagement. For example, research on collaborative governance networks highlights input legitimacy (openness) and throughput legitimacy (quality of decision-making) as key for network legitimacy. OUP Academic In the ASEAN maritime context, the AMO network may therefore function as a “loose” governance network—flexible and inclusive, but potentially weak in enforcement, monitoring and uniform uptake across heterogeneous member states.

Forms and Strategic Functions of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) within the Framework of ASEAN Maritime Cooperation

The ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) can be understood as a policy instrument that plays a strategic role in shaping maritime cooperation across Southeast Asia. Based on document analysis and literature review, the AMO fulfills three principal functions: as a normative instrument, a technocratic coordination mechanism, and a platform for regional interest advocacy. These functions demonstrate that the AMO is not merely an administrative product of ASEAN but a component of the broader effort to build an integrated and collaborative regional maritime governance framework.

As a normative instrument, the AMO establishes the guiding principles of ASEAN maritime cooperation, including inclusivity, connectivity, sustainability, and collective security. These normative values serve as a soft framework that guides member states without imposing legally binding obligations. In this sense, the AMO reinforces ASEAN’s characteristic form of regionalism, which is grounded in consensus and non-interference, emphasizing the formation of shared perceptions rather than formal legal regulation.

As a technocratic coordination mechanism, the AMO functions to integrate various sectoral initiatives that have traditionally been dispersed among different ASEAN bodies. For instance, it serves as a reference point for meetings such as the Senior Officials on Maritime Issues (SOM), the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), and other technical bodies in aligning cross-sectoral policies related to maritime transport, navigational safety, and the blue economy. In this role, the AMO acts as a *policy connector*, reducing programmatic overlaps among member states while enhancing the effectiveness of regional maritime agenda implementation.

Meanwhile, as a platform for regional interest advocacy, the AMO articulates ASEAN's collective position within the increasingly competitive Indo-Pacific maritime discourse. The document strengthens ASEAN's image as a regional actor with a coherent and autonomous maritime agenda, despite the strong influence of external powers such as the United States, China, and Japan. Accordingly, the AMO serves not only a technical but also a political function—as an instrument of normative diplomacy that reinforces the principle of ASEAN Centrality in regional maritime governance.

Overall, the analysis of AMO's strategic functions reveals that the document embodies ASEAN's distinctive approach to maritime regionalism—flexible, inclusive, and consensus-driven. Nevertheless, its non-binding nature represents a key limitation, as the effectiveness of implementation largely depends on the political will and institutional capacities of individual member states. Therefore, the AMO's role as a strategic framework would be more effective if supported by stronger coordination networks and a more systematic regional policy monitoring mechanism.

Mapping the Actor Network in the Formulation and Implementation of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO)

The formulation and implementation of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook (AMO) are inseparable from the involvement of a wide range of actors that constitute ASEAN's maritime cooperation network. Based on an analysis of ASEAN documents and a review of relevant regional maritime forums, this network comprises both state actors and non-state actors who interact within the framework of regional policymaking. Mapping this network aims to identify the structure, relationships, and strategic positions of each actor involved in shaping ASEAN's maritime policy process.

Structurally, the most dominant state actors in the AMO process are the ASEAN Member States (AMS), represented by their respective ministries of foreign affairs and national maritime technical agencies. At the institutional level, formal coordination is conducted through the Senior Officials Meeting on Maritime Issues (SOM) and the ASEAN Maritime Forum (AMF), which serve as the core nodes of the network. These bodies play a central role in aggregating national perspectives, synchronizing agendas, and ensuring that the AMO remains consistent with ASEAN's fundamental principles of consensus-based decision-making and non-interference. This state-centric dominance underscores that the maritime policymaking process within ASEAN continues to revolve primarily around intergovernmental mechanisms, with limited participation from non-state actors.

Nevertheless, non-state actors play a significant role in expanding the functional dimensions of the AMO network. These include research institutions and think tanks such as the ASEAN Centre for Energy (ACE), the ISEAS–Yusuf Ishak Institute, as well as maritime universities and national marine research institutes that contribute through data provision, policy analysis, and technical recommendations. In addition, ASEAN's external dialogue partners—such as the European Union, Japan, and Australia—serve as policy sponsors by providing financial support and technical assistance during the drafting of the AMO. While their involvement enhances ASEAN's institutional capacity, it simultaneously generates a degree of dependency on external resources and agendas.

Figure 1: ASEAN Maritime Outlook Framework

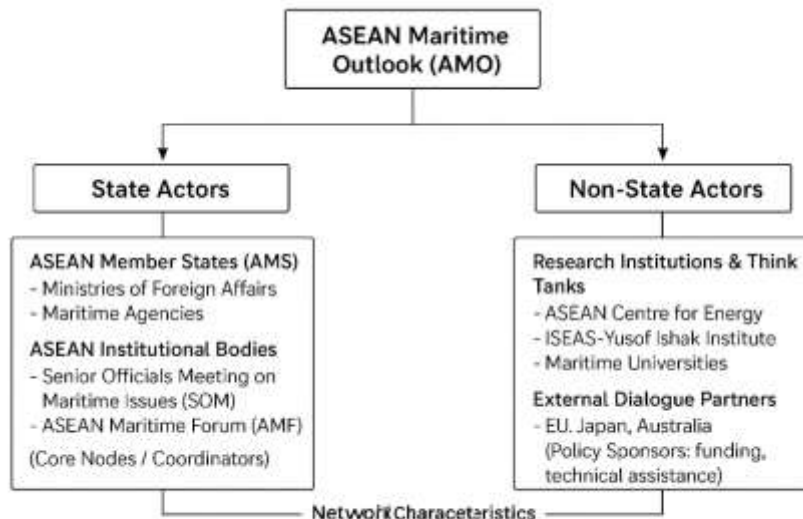


Figure 4.1 – Actor Network in the Formulation and Implementation of the ASEAN Maritime Outlook

In terms of actor relations, the AMO network is multi-level and asymmetric in nature. States with stronger maritime capacities—such as Indonesia, Singapore, and Vietnam—occupy central positions within the network due to their technical expertise, active diplomatic engagement, and strategic interests in maritime security and the blue economy. In contrast, member states with more limited capacities tend to act as policy followers, participating in agendas largely shaped by dominant actors. This asymmetry reflects an imbalance in policy influence within ASEAN’s maritime cooperation network.

Overall, the mapping results reveal that the AMO represents a hybrid policy network, combining intergovernmental coordination with contributions from non-state actors. The resulting structure can be characterized as a loose network—flexible and adaptive, yet lacking a strong decision-making mechanism. Consequently, the effectiveness of the AMO as a regional cooperation instrument depends heavily on ASEAN’s ability to strengthen cross-actor collaboration through more institutionalized and participatory coordination mechanisms.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study aims to gain an in-depth understanding of how networks between actors can influence the stages of formulating and implementing the AMO as an initiative for ASEAN maritime cooperation. The research findings indicate that the success of ASEAN maritime cooperation is determined more by the strength of adaptive and collaborative coordination among actors than by formal institutional structures. The findings also note that Indonesia, Singapore and Vietnam exercise highly dominant control, whilst non-state actors contribute through technical assistance and policy recommendations. This study contributes to enriching the understanding of the dynamics of regionalism and ASEAN maritime governance through the perspective of networks between actors.

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