



THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE TRILATERAL COOPERATIVE ARRANGEMENT (TCA) IN COUNTERING MARITIME TERRORISM BY ABU SAYYAF IN THE SULU SEA

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ABSTRAK

Penelitian ini bertujuan menganalisis efektivitas Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) dalam menangani terorisme maritim di Laut Sulu selama periode 2016-2020. TCA diimplementasikan dalam bentuk Patroli Maritim Trilateral (TMP), Patroli Udara Trilateral (TAP), dan Maritime Command Center (MCC). Metode yang digunakan adalah pendekatan kualitatif melalui studi pustaka dan analisis data sekunder. Hasil penelitian menunjukkan bahwa TCA efektif dalam menurunkan intensitas serangan secara signifikan berkat koordinasi patroli, pertukaran intelijen, dan sistem komando terintegrasi. Hal ini tercermin dari penurunan insiden hingga 94,4 persen selama periode penelitian. Namun demikian, efektivitas tersebut masih menghadapi kendala berupa keterbatasan yurisdiksi, kesenjangan teknologi, serta ketergantungan pada komitmen politik masing-masing negara. Penelitian ini menegaskan bahwa keberlanjutan dan penguatan kerja sama multilateral menjadi kunci dalam membangun keamanan maritim regional yang stabil dan berkelanjutan.

Kata kunci: Maritim, Abu Sayyaf, Terorisme, Laut Sulu, ASEAN

ABSTRACT

This study aims to analyze the effectiveness of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) in addressing maritime terrorism in the Sulu Sea during the 2016–2020 period. The TCA was implemented through the Trilateral Maritime Patrol (TMP), Trilateral Air Patrol (TAP), and Maritime Command Center (MCC). The study employs a qualitative approach through literature review and secondary data analysis. The findings indicate that the TCA was effective in significantly reducing the intensity of attacks through coordinated patrols, intelligence sharing, and an integrated command system. This is reflected in the 94.4 percent decrease in incidents during the research period. Nevertheless, the effectiveness of the arrangement still faces challenges, including jurisdictional limitations, technological disparities, and dependence on the political commitment of each participating country. This study emphasizes that the sustainability and strengthening of multilateral cooperation are essential to building stable and sustainable regional maritime security.

Keywords: Maritime, Abu Sayyaf, Terrorism, Sulu Sea, ASEAN

BACKGROUND

Southeast Asia enjoys a strategic position along international shipping routes, making it vital for global trade and maritime connectivity. The Straits of Malacca, Sunda Strait, and South China Sea are some of the world's busiest sea lanes, connecting the Pacific and Indian Oceans and serving as the main artery for the distribution of goods from East Asia to South Asia, the Middle East, Europe, and Africa. The presence of major ports such as Singapore, Tanjung Priok in Indonesia, and Port Klang in Malaysia reinforces the region's role as a global logistics and trade hub.

However, despite its important geographic location, Southeast Asia also faces serious challenges related to maritime security. The region is vulnerable to various forms of transnational crime, including maritime terrorism, arms and drug smuggling, human trafficking, and ship hijacking. The threat of maritime terrorism is increasingly real, with extremist groups exploiting remote waters for training, fundraising, and even smuggling logistics. Attacks on merchant vessels, kidnapping of crew members for ransom, and sabotage of port facilities are all real manifestations of this threat.

This situation is exacerbated by the complexity of maritime jurisdictions in Southeast Asia, weak oversight in some maritime border areas, and limited maritime law enforcement capacity. Regional cooperation, such as through the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN), as well as bilateral and multilateral initiatives such as coordinated patrols in the Strait of Malacca between Indonesia, Malaysia, and Singapore, have been implemented to improve maritime security (Gu, 2022). However, increased coordination, intelligence sharing, and modernization of maritime patrol facilities are still needed to address the evolving threat dynamics. Although Southeast Asia has a very high strategic value in global trade, maritime security remains a major challenge that must be addressed collectively by countries in the region to ensure stability, the smooth flow of goods, and the protection of economic and humanitarian interests in this region.

The Sulu Sea is one of the strategic waters in Southeast Asia, located between the southern Philippines, Malaysia (Sabah State), and Indonesia (North Kalimantan). This area forms a maritime triangle that connects three countries at once, making it a very important region geopolitically and geoeconomically (Chaer et al., 2021). The Sulu Sea serves as a vital link between the Pacific Ocean and the Sulawesi Sea, and is part of a regional shipping route used for trade, fishing, and international transportation. Merchant vessels, fishing boats, and ships transporting industrial and energy products frequently traverse this region as part of Southeast Asia's commodity distribution network.

However, despite its strategic role, the Sulu Sea is also known as one of the waters most vulnerable to transnational crime, making it a hotspot on the regional maritime security map. For years, this region has been a hotbed for various forms of transnational crime, such as piracy, human and drug smuggling, illegal arms trafficking, and maritime terrorism. The region's topography, consisting of numerous small islands, a complex coastline, and weak cross-border surveillance, makes the Sulu Sea highly vulnerable to exploitation by criminal groups and armed militants.

One of the most serious threats emerging in the Sulu Sea is the activity of the Abu Sayyaf Group and its affiliates, which are known for kidnapping foreign ship crews and tourists for ransom. Since 2016, the Abu Sayyaf Group has intensified its activities, including kidnapping merchant and fishing vessel crews, hijacking, and smuggling weapons and people (Chaer et al., 2021). This activity not only threatens the safety of shipping and the economies of coastal states but also has the potential to expand extremist networks in maritime areas. Unilateral measures have proven ineffective in addressing this transnational threat, necessitating a more integrated and collaborative approach.

The Sulu Sea and its surrounding islands, particularly the southern Philippines, such as Mindanao, the Sulu Archipelago, Basilan, and Tawi-Tawi, have long been

known as a base for armed and terrorist activities. One of the most notorious groups operating in this region is the Abu Sayyaf, an armed separatist group affiliated with global terrorist networks such as Al-Qaeda and later ISIS. Their presence in the region not only creates domestic instability in the Philippines but also has serious regional implications, particularly in the context of maritime security (Motyavin & Stepanov, 2024).

These groups exploit the geographical characteristics of the Sulu Sea, which consists of numerous small islands, narrow waters, and hidden coastlines. This allows them to move flexibly and conceal themselves from security surveillance. The activities of armed groups like the Abu Sayyaf in the Sulu Sea not only pose a direct threat to Philippine security but also have significant implications for national and regional stability in Southeast Asia, particularly for neighboring countries like Indonesia and Malaysia (Maulana & Apri Wijaya, 2022). The border areas of Indonesia in North Kalimantan and Malaysia in Sabah, which directly border the Sulu Sea, face serious risks due to infiltration by militant groups who use these waters as operational and escape routes. Fear of the infiltration of radical ideology from these terrorist groups has sparked concerns about the potential expansion of transnational terrorist networks that could disrupt national and social security in the border region. In addition to physical threats such as attacks and piracy, the spread of extremist ideology also has the potential to undermine social stability, polarize society, and hamper economic and tourism development in the region. Within this framework, it is essential to assess the effectiveness of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement (TCA) in countering maritime terrorism by the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Sulu Sea region, given the transboundary nature of the threat and the complexity of coordination between the countries involved.

LITERATURE REVIEW

In addressing the effectiveness of the TCA as a strategy to counter maritime terrorism by the Abu Sayyaf Group in the Sulu Sea, a relevant theoretical approach is the integration of liberal international relations theory and modern counterterrorism concepts. Both provide complementary conceptual frameworks for understanding the dynamics of interstate cooperation in addressing non-traditional, transnational security threats.

Liberalism views cooperation between states as not only possible but also necessary in addressing complex global challenges, such as terrorism and transnational crime. Unlike realism, which emphasizes conflicts of interest and power struggles, liberalism believes that states can cooperate constructively in an interdependent international environment (Keohane & Nye, 2012). According to Keohane and Nye (2012), in an increasingly connected world, complex interdependence creates opportunities for states to establish joint institutions, reduce uncertainty, and enhance regional stability through collaborative mechanisms.

This approach is highly relevant in the context of Southeast Asian maritime security, particularly in the Sulu Sea region, which has become an epicenter of conflict due to weak oversight, overlapping jurisdictions, and the presence of non-state armed groups such as the Abu Sayyaf. In this regard, the establishment of the TCA in 2017 between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines reflects a liberal response to a common threat, namely by fostering regional security cooperation that is not only technical but also political and normative. This initiative prioritizes systematic dialogue, coordination, and institutional mechanisms in the form of Trilateral Maritime Patrols (TMP), Trilateral Air Patrols (TAP), and the establishment of joint Maritime Command Centers (MCC). These efforts align with liberal principles regarding the importance of international institutions as facilitators of cooperation and conflict resolution (Dunne et al., 2016).

However, to understand the operational effectiveness of TCA, integration with the counterterrorism concept is required. Modern counterterrorism goes beyond military or repressive responses to attacks. It represents a multidimensional strategy encompassing early surveillance, intelligence exchange, law enforcement cooperation, local community capacity building, and ideological counternarratives against radicalization. Martin (2020) explains that counterterrorism strategies account for the flexible and adaptive nature of terror groups, particularly in areas such as the Sulu Sea, which possess geographical characteristics that facilitate the mobility of armed groups and illegal activities, including kidnapping, arms smuggling, and fundraising.

Within the TCA framework, counterterrorism elements are implemented through the systematic integration of maritime and air surveillance, real-time interstate information sharing, and coordinated actions enabling rapid responses to threats. This approach demonstrates the synergy between liberalism and counterterrorism: cross-border cooperation becomes more effective when states prioritize not only their internal security interests but also acknowledge collective regional interests that demand mutual solidarity and trust.

Counterterrorism literature emphasizes the importance of a whole-of-government approach and community engagement in combating terrorist networks. In this context, the development of coastal areas, historically used as logistical and recruitment bases for Abu Sayyaf, and the involvement of local communities in surveillance systems constitute a long-term strategy aligned with the liberal agenda, which emphasizes security through development and civic participation (Cronin, 2009). Therefore, the effectiveness of TCA depends not only on patrols or military strength, but also on how this cooperation fosters enhanced social, political, and economic capacity in vulnerable areas.

Thus, integrating liberalism with counterterrorism concepts offers a comprehensive perspective for assessing the effectiveness of the TCA. Liberalism

explains why such cooperation emerges and persists despite strong state sovereignty, while counterterrorism clarifies how these strategies are operationalized to counter maritime terrorism. In the context of the Sulu Sea, characterized by transnational dynamics and limited state capacity, this integrative approach provides a solid foundation for analyzing regional security strategies both conceptually and empirically.

The author assumes that the presence of terrorist organizations threatening state sovereignty necessitates the obligation of states to undertake counteractions. Such threats become increasingly complex when terrorist activities occur across the borders of two or more states, thereby making interstate cooperation indispensable. The establishment of the TCA among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines constitutes tangible evidence of collective efforts to minimize terrorist activities in the Sulu Sea. The TCA institution is consistent with liberal principles, which emphasize the construction of institutions and cooperative mechanisms to reduce uncertainty and enhance regional stability. The author further assumes that if the TCA optimizes patrol coordination and information sharing in accordance with its mandate, the incidence of maritime terrorism can be significantly reduced.

METHODOLOGY

This study employs a qualitative approach based on a literature review (library research) to analyze multilateral strategies against maritime terrorism through the implementation of the TCA in the Sulu Sea (2016–2020). This approach was chosen because the research focuses on examining in depth the dynamics of security cooperation among states, patterns of response to cross-border threats, and the effectiveness of strategies within a regional context. The literature review served as the primary method of data collection, involving the examination of relevant secondary sources such as official reports from the governments of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the

Philippines, scientific journals, academic books, and credible media reports documenting the development of the TMP and the activities of the Abu Sayyaf Group.

The analysis was conducted thematically and descriptively, identifying patterns of cooperation, operational responses to incidents, and structural as well as coordinative challenges among states. Through this literature review, the study builds a theoretical and empirical understanding of the role of multilateral strategies in fostering collective maritime security in Southeast Asia.

DISCUSSION

The Threat of Maritime Terrorism in the Sulu Sea

The Sulu Sea is among the most vulnerable maritime regions in Southeast Asia, serving as a battlefield for non-state armed groups, most notably the Abu Sayyaf. This group is notorious for its involvement in various maritime crimes, including kidnapping-for-ransom, hijacking, arms smuggling, and cross-border trafficking. The threat is not confined locally but has transnational implications, directly affecting strategic areas bordering Indonesia (North Kalimantan) and Malaysia (Sabah) (Haikal & Wahyudin, 2024).

The unique geography of the Sulu Sea is a key factor in the growth of maritime terrorism in Southeast Asia. This region is characterized by hundreds of small islands, atolls, narrow channels, and coastal areas with limited infrastructure and remoteness from national administrative centers. These conditions create “grey” areas, territories that straddle legal jurisdictions yet remain de facto beyond effective state control. Such a lack of control provides a strategic advantage for militant groups like the Abu Sayyaf in conducting their operations.

The inaccessible geography of the Sulu Sea makes it an ideal location for rapid mobility, concealment, and evacuation. Militants can easily move between islands using small radar-evading boats, enabling swift crossing into Malaysian waters

(Sabah) or Indonesian waters (North Kalimantan). This maritime corridor has long served as a strategic route for the smuggling of weapons, logistics, narcotics, and human trafficking. Such flexibility enables armed groups to endure even when security forces intensify military operations in specific areas (Narahara, 2024).

In addition to serving as refuges and hideouts, the remote coastal areas around the Sulu Sea are also frequently used as hostage-taking sites for kidnapped ship crews and foreign nationals. From these locations, militant groups negotiate ransoms while maintaining mobility to evade law enforcement operations. This demonstrates that limited state control over maritime borders constitutes a loophole exploited by terrorist groups.

Furthermore, this region is characterized by transnational cultural and ethnic ties, where local communities along maritime borders, particularly those with ethnic and linguistic connections, often function as transit points or even support networks. Motivated by solidarity, coercion, or economic gain, some local communities provide shelter or logistical support for militants.

In this context, the topography of the Sulu Sea not only poses physical challenges to security forces but also highlights structural weaknesses in the control of state sovereignty. Without intensive surveillance and strong cross-border cooperation, this region will remain a breeding ground for organized crime and maritime terrorism. Therefore, security strategies cannot rely solely on military force but must adopt a collaborative approach that empowers local communities and strengthens regionally based maritime surveillance technology.

Furthermore, weak maritime security capacity in the border areas of the Philippines, Malaysia, and Indonesia represents a major challenge in countering maritime terrorism in the Sulu Sea. Despite their political commitment to maintaining regional stability, these three coastal states continue to face significant technical limitations, including insufficient personnel, limited technological sophistication, and

inadequate availability of naval vessels capable of effectively and sustainably reaching remote areas.

The vast, complex, and island-studded waters of the Sulu Sea require a robust surveillance and control system, along with a rapid response capability. However, the security in this region remains sporadic and reactive rather than preventive. Maritime patrols by the navy and maritime police are unable to consistently cover the entire area due to limited fuel, logistics, patrol vessels, and technical expertise. In many cases, authorities often respond only after an attack, kidnapping, or hijacking has occurred.

On the other hand, advanced surveillance technologies, including maritime radar, early warning systems, drones, and cross-command communications, remain limited, particularly at small outposts and remote areas. This lack of technological capacity prevents authorities from accessing crucial information that could help intercept cross-border terrorist movements (Mulyanto, 2021). Even in emergencies, coordination between units is frequently delayed due to signal constraints, differences in command systems, and limited interoperability of communication equipment among countries.

Terrorist groups like Abu Sayyaf exploit these limitations to their full advantage, quickly identifying weak patrol patterns and strategizing for escape, concealment, or criminal operations. In several incidents, such as the kidnapping of Indonesian or Malaysian fishing boat crews, the perpetrators managed to cross into neighboring countries' territories within hours, without interception by security forces.

This imbalance in security capacity not only undermines counterterrorism efforts but also erodes public trust in the state's presence at the border. Many coastal residents feel unprotected and consequently engage in compromising interactions with criminal groups for safety or economic gain. In the long term, this strengthens the criminal ecosystem and erodes state legitimacy. In some cases, local communities

actively or passively support armed groups' activities. Some are motivated by economic incentives, such as providing logistics or information, while others act under compulsion, security pressures, or kinship ties. The precarious socio-economic conditions across many small islands around the Sulu Sea make communities vulnerable to exploitation by criminal networks, thereby strengthening the social infrastructure of terrorist groups at the grassroots level.

Maritime terrorism in the Sulu Sea constitutes a complex and challenging asymmetric threat. In this context, non-state actors like the Abu Sayyaf employ unconventional methods that evade conventional security approaches. Rather than relying on substantial military power, they exploit geographical and structural weaknesses in the maritime region, including gaps in surveillance, complex topography, and weak border control, to conduct transnational criminal operations. Activities such as ship hijacking, crew kidnapping for ransom, arms smuggling, and illicit fundraising are carried out via maritime routes, making the Sulu Sea a strategic maneuvering space for maritime terrorism (Muammar & Mosyofa, 2024).

This forces coastal states, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines, to develop a multidimensional strategy rather than relying solely on military responses. A military approach without robust intelligence support often fails to prevent attacks or apprehend perpetrators who move rapidly between regions. In this regard, the TCA emerged as a collective framework integrating coordinated maritime patrols, a joint command center, and cross-border intelligence cooperation. This strategy enhances state presence at sea and constrains terrorist groups that have traditionally exploited the lack of coordination among nations.

However, effective military strategies and patrols alone are insufficient to address the roots of maritime terrorism. Coastal areas that serve as bases for Abu Sayyaf's logistical support and recruitment are often marked by extreme poverty, isolation, and development inequality. Under these conditions, local communities are

vulnerable to recruitment or exploitation by terrorist networks, whether voluntarily for ideological reasons or compelled by economic and security pressures. Therefore, security approaches must be broadened to encompass inclusive coastal development, including improving infrastructure, education, health services, and access to the formal economy (Suryawan et al., 2021).

On the other hand, deradicalization efforts and ideological counter-narratives are essential to disrupting the cycle of terrorist group regeneration in local communities. In the context of maritime terrorism, violent ideologies circulate not only on land but also via informal shipping networks, small ports, and cross-border fishing communities.

Implementation of the Trilateral Cooperative Arrangement as a Multilateral Strategy

In response to the growing threat of maritime terrorism emanating from armed groups such as the Abu Sayyaf and other transnational criminal networks in the Sulu Sea region, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines officially launched the TCA initiative in 2017. The TCA is a maritime security cooperation framework designed to strengthen control over waters that have long constituted a weak point in surveillance and law enforcement.

TCA is a trilateral framework established in response to the growing threat of transnational crime in the border waters, particularly in the Sulu Sea and Sulawesi Sea (Maulana & Apri Wijaya, 2022). The TCA aims to enhance maritime security, particularly in countering maritime terrorism, piracy, kidnapping for ransom, arms smuggling, and other forms of transnational crime.

The Sulu Sea has long constituted a hotspot for non-traditional security conflicts in Southeast Asia. Armed groups like the Abu Sayyaf consistently exploit the region's geographical characteristics, characterized by numerous small islands and vast yet

inaccessible waters, to conduct kidnappings, hijackings, smuggling, and cross-border trafficking.

The TCA was established as a collective response to this reality. The three countries recognized that no single nation could confront this transnational threat alone. Thus, the TCA provides a formal framework for confronting non-state more effective and coordinated manner (Mulyanto, 2021).

Establishment of Maritime Command Centers

MCCs are the key component in the implementation of the TCA between Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. Located in Tarakan (Indonesia), Tawau (Malaysia), and Bongao (Philippines), the MCCs serve as operational control and coordination hubs that integrate the activities of the TMP and TAP (Balderas, 2024). The primary role of the MCC is to collect and analyze information from various sources, including aerial and maritime surveillance, and rapidly disseminate it to operational units in the field. Furthermore, the MCC functions as the primary liaison among countries, aligning patrol schedules, coordinating responses to potential threats, and expediting cross-border decision-making, particularly in emergencies such as hostage-taking or smuggling.

Although the TMP does not permit cross-border pursuits without official authorization, the presence of the MCC enables rapid coordination of permits, thereby reducing bureaucratic hurdles in incident handling. In addition, the MCC enhances the interoperability of the three countries' security forces through real-time communication, procedural alignment, and structured information exchange. Beyond its technical-operational role, the MCC serves as a crucial platform for confidence-building among countries, reducing the risk of conflict at sea, and strengthening regional synergy in addressing transnational non-traditional maritime threats.

Implementation of Coordinated Trilateral Maritime Patrol

One of the main pillars of the TCA is the implementation of TMP, coordinated patrols involving the navies and coast guards of Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The TMP was established as a direct response to the prevalence of transnational crime in the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas, including kidnapping for ransom, hijacking, human trafficking, and arms and drug smuggling. The primary objective of these patrols is to strengthen the presence of security forces at sea, create a deterrent effect, and restrict the mobility of armed groups and organized crime networks that exploit poorly supervised waters (Primayanti et al., 2020).

TMP patrols are conducted in a scheduled, simultaneous, and coordinated fashion, although they remain confined to the jurisdiction of each participating country. Each country has its own maritime zone, and coordination is facilitated through a joint communication and command system managed by MCCs located in Tarakan, Tawau, and Bongao. These MCCs function as joint control centers, enabling the real-time exchange of data and intelligence, coordinating patrol vessel movements, and formulating rapid responses to security incidents (Witono et al., 2024).

One of the strengths of the TMP lies in its increased effectiveness in detecting and responding to suspicious activities at sea. Through synchronized patrol schedules, criminal groups face greater difficulty in predicting the presence of security forces, thereby narrowing their maneuvering space. Furthermore, the intelligence exchange mechanism facilitated by the MCC enables the three countries to issue early warning of potential attacks or terrorist group movements within their maritime zones.

Nevertheless, the TMP faces certain limitations. A key limitation is the non-hot pursuit provision, which prohibits patrol vessels from pursuing or entering another country's territorial waters without prior authorization. This provision often hinders the pursuit of armed groups or criminals who move swiftly across national maritime boundaries. Moreover, differences in operational procedures, language, capacity, and

resources among the countries occasionally complicate technical coordination in practice.

Implementation of Trilateral Air Patrol

Complementing maritime patrols, the TCA incorporates another key element: the TAP. This component is designed to enhance maritime surveillance effectiveness through coordinated aerial operations among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines. The TAP is conducted using military surveillance aircraft from each country, equipped with advanced sensors and real-time communication systems.

The primary objective of the TAP is to expand the scope of surveillance, particularly in waters that are difficult for sea patrol vessels to access; to monitor the movement of small, and fast vessels, such as motorized boats frequently used by militant groups or smugglers, that often evade detection from conventional sea radar; and to provide real-time visual information to naval units and MCCs thereby supporting rapid and targeted decision-making (Haikal & Wahyudin, 2024).

TAP is crucial in the context of maritime terrorism in the Sulu Sea, where non-state actors such as Abu Sayyaf use lanes dynamically and adaptively. By operating aircraft from higher and broader airspace, the TAP can identify suspicious movement patterns before the vessels reach land or engage their targets. Aerial surveillance is also vital in anticipating the movement of illicit logistics, including weapons, explosives, and criminal proceeds smuggled across countries.

Furthermore, the TAP holds strategic value in accelerating coordination among maritime patrol units, particularly during urgent incidents, including kidnappings, ambushes, or hostage rescues. Its ability to provide direct aerial guidance enables patrol vessels to focus pursuits and conserve operational time.

However, like the TMP, the TAP also encounters several challenges in its implementation. Variations in technological capacity, aircraft readiness, and

communication interoperability among the countries may undermine coordination effectiveness. Therefore, harmonization of standard operating procedures, conducting regular joint training, and strengthening the monitoring system integration are essential to ensure that the TAP functions optimally as a collective early detection mechanism. Overall, the TAP reinforces the maritime surveillance framework within the TCA and makes a significant contribution to reducing security risks in the Sulu Sea. It serves not only as a defense instrument but also as a symbol of regional unity in safeguarding maritime sovereignty and security against terrorism and transnational crime.

Within the framework of the TCA, the operational scheme for securing maritime areas among Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines is constructed through the integration of three main components: the TAP, MCC, and TMP (Chaer et al., 2021). The TAP functions as an aerial surveillance and early detection system, with military surveillance aircraft from the three countries regularly conducting patrols to identify suspicious activities at sea, such as unidentified small vessels, unusual movements, or indications of smuggling and other violations. Information collected by the TAP is transmitted to the MCC, which serves as a joint control and coordination center. The MCC is responsible for analyzing data, confirming threats, and relaying operational directives to TMP maritime units. Furthermore, the MCC plays a crucial role in synchronizing patrol schedules among the countries and facilitating rapid decision-making in cross-border emergencies. Based on information and directives from the MCC, TMP units, comprising naval patrol vessels from each country, serve as the primary responders. These vessels operate within their respective jurisdictions but maintain intensive coordination to respond quickly and effectively to potential threats. This scheme establishes a synergistic chain of action linking aerial surveillance, ground control centers, and tactical responses at sea, thereby collectively strengthening the regional maritime security system.

The 2018 Case in the Sulu Sea around Tawi-Tawi Island

A concrete example of the effectiveness of the TCA occurred in 2018 in the Sulu Sea near Tawi-Tawi Island, a strategic crossing route between the Southern Philippines and Sabah, Malaysia (Primayanti et al., 2020). In this incident, a military reconnaissance aircraft from the TAP detected suspicious movements of two speedboats departing Philippine territory and heading toward Malaysian waters. Their high speed and unusual course immediately triggered a surveillance alert, as this route has frequently been exploited by armed groups such as Abu Sayyaf to conduct cross-border kidnappings.

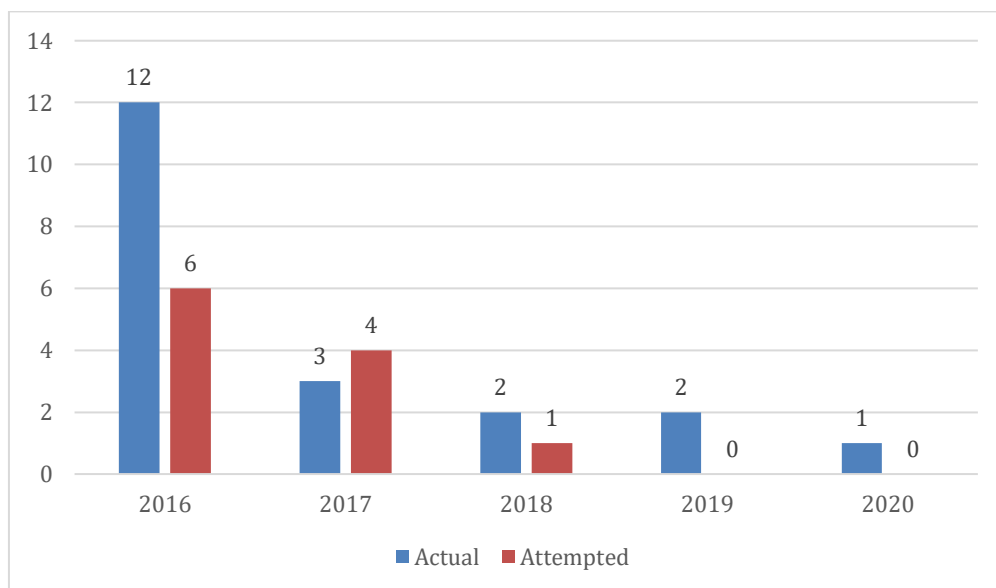
The initial detection was immediately transmitted to the MCC in Bongao, Philippines, which verified the data and coordinated a response with the MCC in Tawau, Malaysia. Shortly thereafter, the order was relayed to the Malaysian TMP unit operating in the border area. Malaysian patrol vessels subsequently established a blockade and successfully intercepted the boats before they reached the Sabah coast.

The interception revealed that the vessel was carrying a hostage who had previously been kidnapped in the Philippines, along with Abu Sayyaf logistics, including light weapons and communication equipment. This swift action thwarted further kidnapping attempts, saved the hostage's life, and disrupted the logistics chain of the transnational terrorist group.

The success of this operation clearly demonstrates the effectiveness of the TCA system, particularly the detection–coordination–response cycle involving the TAP, MCC, and TMP. Robust cross-border collaboration among the three countries, through real-time intelligence sharing and activation of rapid response units, was a key factor in the success of the operation. Furthermore, this incident illustrates that addressing non-traditional maritime security threats necessitates a swift, precise, and coordinated collective response.

More broadly, this success has positively influenced perceptions of regional security and reinforced the political commitment of the three countries to sustain and further develop cooperation under the TCA. This operation also demonstrated that a consistent security presence, combined with an integrated detection and communication system, can significantly restrict the movement of maritime criminal and terrorist groups in Southeast Asia’s border regions. Furthermore, the case around Tawi-Tawi Island in 2018, as cited in the Annual Report of the international organization Regional Cooperation Agreement on Combating Piracy and Armed Robbery against Ships in Asia (ReCAAP), indicates a decline in incidents between 2016 and 2020.

Figure 1.
Reports and the Number of Incidents in the Sulu–Sulawesi Seas, 2016–2020



Source: ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre (2025)

According to the report cited from the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, specifically concerning the Sulu and Sulawesi Seas, the institution noted that in 2016, there were a total of 18 incidents, comprising 12 actual occurrences and six attempted cases. In the following year, seven incidents were recorded, consisting of three actual

and four attempted. By 2018, the number had decreased to three incidents, including two actual and one attempted. In 2019, only two actual incidents were reported, followed by a single actual incident in the subsequent year (ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre, 2025). Statistical data indicate a consistent decline in incidents from 2016 to 2020, reaching a reduction rate of 94.4 percent.

CONCLUSION

The threat of maritime terrorism in the Sulu Sea, particularly from the Abu Sayyaf Group, has generated instability in Southeast Asia's border regions. Challenging geographical features, weak jurisdictional controls, and the presence of transnational criminal networks make this region highly vulnerable and demand collective action. In response, Indonesia, Malaysia, and the Philippines initiated the TCA as a strategic framework for structured and sustainable regional cooperation. Through synergy among coordinated TMP, TAP, and MCC, the three countries have enhanced their capacity for early detection and response to armed group activity. The successful interception of a kidnapping in 2018 provides concrete evidence that this cooperation can suppress the mobility and effectiveness of the Abu Sayyaf network in regional waters.

From a liberal perspective, the TCA illustrates how states can construct collective mechanisms grounded in shared interests to address non-traditional security challenges. Liberalism emphasizes interdependence and shared institutions as the foundation of cooperation, which in the TCA is reflected in operational coordination and cross-border intelligence exchange. Moreover, the concept of counterterrorism is central to explaining the technical and operational implementation of the TCA. This cooperation extends beyond military power to encompass preventive, collaborative, and development-oriented strategies. It highlights the importance of

addressing the root causes of terrorism, including strengthening coastal communities, enhancing surveillance capacity, and curbing the spread of radicalism.

Therefore, the TCA can be regarded as an effective model of regional security cooperation in responding to maritime terrorism. Its effectiveness lies in the integration of complementary theoretical and practical approaches. Sustaining these efforts requires strong political commitment, enhanced technological capacity, and active involvement of local communities in building inclusive maritime resilience in Southeast Asia. From 2016 to 2020, based on statistical data, there was a declining trend in maritime terrorism incidents, amounting to a 94.4 percent reduction according to reports from the ReCAAP Information Sharing Centre.

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