

SAFESEAS COMMENTARY



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UNITING NATIONS: DEVELOPING MARITIME DOMAIN AWARENESS FOR THE 'BLUE PACIFIC'

Pacific island states face a pressing need to understand more about what's happening in the waters that surround them and to work more closely to deal with threats and crises

Maritime security-related issues represent some of the most valuable areas for cooperation in identifying and countering behaviour ranging from the trafficking of people, drugs, small arms and other illicit goods; illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing; and other environmental crimes.

As well, the safety of ferries and inter-island shipping are key issues in a region dependent on maritime transport, so safety of navigation and effective search and rescue are essential. And protecting marine ecosystems and resources is vital to food security, human health and economic well-being.

This means it's crucial to share information on marine incidents, oil spill responses, management and conservation of fisheries resources, marine pollution and coastal management.

A key to addressing these challenges regionally and nationally is maritime domain awareness (MDA)—understanding what happens at sea. Information sharing, fusion and joint analysis allow countries to react faster to incidents and set regional priorities.

The communique of the 2017 Pacific Island Forum acknowledged 'the need

to strengthen cooperation and information sharing in maritime domain awareness'. In 2017, Forum leaders endorsed the 'Blue Pacific' identity to re-capture the potential of the region's shared stewardship of the Pacific Ocean.

How will the region realise MDA?

The Pacific is more advanced than many other regions that have initiated MDA, but national capacities are still very weak. To date there's little evidence that much information has been shared between regional bodies responsible for maritime security, shipping, and maritime safety and protecting the marine environment.

An important future building block will be the Forum Fisheries Agency (FFA) surveillance centre in Honiara. It holds a maritime operational picture based on data provided through member states' vessel monitoring systems, some high seas data from the Western Central Pacific Fisheries Commission, as well as ships' automatic identification systems and long-range tracking and identification systems. There's considerable capacity for operational information management and analysis at FFA's surveillance centre.

Many forums and bodies together have large sets of complementary data and experience. These include mechanisms under the Nuie Treaty, the FFA, the Pacific Transnational Crime Coordination Centre, customs automated systems and partnerships, as well as forums like the Pacific Immigration Directors Conference and the Pacific Islands Chiefs of Police. Many of these groupings have demonstrated what can be gained from information sharing.

So where from here for regional MDA? What instruments will succeed? We make six suggestions.

A useful first step will be to agree on a single point of contact (SPOC) for maritime security in each country. SPOCs are a very cost effective solution to disseminate and share information, discuss challenges and develop consent proposals for how to proceed in advancing other instruments.

Identifying the right SPOC in each country will not be easy: it implies that one agency will be the lead. The right SPOC needs to be able to transmit information at the national level and ensure that it receives the required attention.

The SPOC system forms the basis for a second measure that can be implemented with low cost and with few administrative, legal or diplomatic hurdles. Regular dialogues of the SPOCs and other maritime actors on MDA will assist in developing a shared understanding of priorities.

Such dialogues enable pragmatic forms of operational cooperation and provide the basis for social bonds and trust. They provide transparency to planned activities, such as operations or capacity building. This model has been used successfully outside the Pacific. Examples include meetings addressing human trafficking in the Mediterranean, piracy off Somalia and the monthly awareness meetings of Singapore's Information Fusion Centre.

In the Pacific such meetings will be more difficult to organise and more costly considering the region's size. But such costs can be reduced if meetings are held back-to-back with other events and maximum use is made of video and voice conferencing.

A third measure for effective MDA would be more formal agreements that clarify expectations and provide basic operating procedures, possibly through memoranda of understanding. More structured instruments are codes of conduct, like the Djibouti Code of Conduct in the western Indian Ocean. When accompanied by action plans and activities, these are important regional frameworks.

A fourth step for effective regional MDA is institutional arrangements for sharing and analysing information and organising responses.

One model for such a regional centre is the Information Fusion Centre (IFC) based in Singapore. The IFC provides the maritime domain picture for the ASEAN countries and to all its other participating countries (maritime accidents as well as illegal activities) and services such as newsletters and advice to the shipping industry.

The IFC includes international liaison officers seconded by interested states. These allow joint interpretation of the situation, as well rapid distribution to national authorities.

While the ideas behind the IFC are relevant, it's a costly undertaking. Arguably the Pacific would do better to take smaller steps and seek something on a lower scale developed out of the FFA's surveillance operations centre. (One possible model for a regional maritime coordination centre, building on FFA's surveillance centre, has been set out in ASPI's special report, *Australia and the South Pacific: rising to the challenge*.)

A fifth requirement is to embed activities in a broader maritime security framework, ideally through national and regional maritime security strategies. These have been successful in Europe and in Africa, ensuring the buy-in of political and other stakeholders. A strategy doesn't necessarily have to be developed first, but should be progressed with any MDA structures.

The sixth component for effective Pacific MDA is support from donors. In funding MDA, donors will, however, bring their own agendas, priorities and preferences for systems or structures. Australia will certainly be a pivotal partner working through the Pacific Maritime Security Program providing new patrol craft to many island states, and new commitments to provide regional aerial surveillance.

France and non-regional donors such as the EU, Japan, Singapore, the UK and the US should also be involved in advancing regional maritime security arrangements. Each has made commitments and related initiatives that can be built upon.

In working with donors, it's essential that the island states start with their own vision, and develop their own strategy and priorities. The closer the Pacific countries can work together, the more they'll be able to avoid duplication of effort or gaps in areas of least attraction for funding by donors.

In developing the MDA architecture, the region needs to take an incremental approach that pursues realistic goals and ensures ownership and sustainability. Any architecture shouldn't focus just on threats or crime. It should also ensure that measures benefit the larger blue economy and regional ocean governance.

As we stress above, existing agreements and arrangements should be built upon wherever possible. There's also a need to advance coordination of regional and/or sub-regional capacity-building exercises and training related to maritime security information sharing.

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