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THE ROLE OF NATIONAL MARITIME SINGLE POINT OF CONDUCT IN DEVELOPING RESILIENCE AGAINST MARITIME CRIME SYNDICATES

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Malaysia is a country that is blessed with a strategic location between the east and the west of international trading routes. The country has also long benefitted from an abundance of natural resources. As such, Malaysia has prospered economically and has become an enduring maritime nation. However, as much as these maritime attributes contribute positively to the country, it is fair to argue that the same maritime attributes also naturally invite various maritime crimes to Malaysian waters. Maritime crimes can be generally categorised into smuggling, trafficking, fishery crimes and piracy, armed robbery and kidnapping for ransom - all of which are not unprecedented in Malaysia. Authorities spend a fortune on security, losing billions in revenue and resources, while organised crime rakes in trillions every year. Some pressing issues Malaysian authorities face are seaborne immigration, smuggling and trafficking via the Andaman Sea. Kidnapping for ransom by separatist and terrorist groups and piracy in the Sulu Sea is also

increasing. In the South China Sea, illegal, unreported and unregulated fishing is also carried out.

These threats have raised concern, making it imperative for the government to respond acutely. In this view, it is comprehended that a National Maritime Single Point of Contact (NMSPOC) would help to develop the country's resilience against maritime crimes. This NMSPOC will be a centralised mechanism that serves the needs of all related maritime enforcement agencies in addressing maritime organised crime syndicates. The reason for establishing NMSPOC is understood from the fact that organised crime surpasses the land-sea nexus and thrives across borders. Hence the role of the coast guard alone cannot address the problem by itself and requires another setup to address this issue with the involvement of other crucial maritime-related agencies. It is also driven by the fact that it could better tackle the nature of organised crime through information-led operations – one that could only be achieved through interagency cooperation. In other words, establishing NMSPOC would detect, disrupt and deter maritime crimes coming into the country through a hub for sharing, depositing and interpreting information. This resource concentration would help create more vital maritime domain awareness and mitigate any form of maritime crime.

Policymakers understand the importance of NMSPOC in the country, and in 2017, a proposal was made to establish a Malaysia Maritime Sovereignty and Security Operating Centre. In 2018, the first national workshop on Single Point of Contact (SPAC) was held, and in 2020, there were further discussions in Penang – all these meetings were headed by the National Security Council (NSC). The eighteen agencies involved agreed that working with other agencies could develop an environment promoting sharing of knowledge, expertise and intelligence.

The significance of a SPOC in Malaysia can also be observed in many Association of Southeast Asia Nations (ASEAN) members which launched similar efforts to address issues regarding organised crime syndicates in their respective countries. In Indonesia, the Indonesia Maritime Security Agency is mandated to coordinate law enforcement agencies at sea. In the Philippines, the National Coast Watch Centre was inaugurated in 2015 with the support of Australia and the United States. The Singapore government set up the maritime security task force (MSTF)/Maritime Security Command led by the Republic of Singapore Navy (RSN) in 2009 while in 2010 Brunei formed its National Maritime Coordination Centre. Cambodia created the National Committee on Maritime Security also in 2009 and Vietnam has the Maritime Security Information Centre. All these efforts show that ASEAN members are aware that no single agency can address organised crime, but rather, it must be addressed collectively through interagency cooperation.

The development of the NMSPOC can contribute significantly to Malaysia's maritime crime challenges. Regionally, the NMSPOC can elevate Malaysia's position as a significant watchdog between the Indian and Pacific oceans. Its geographical proximity can also make Malaysia a one-stop centre with information for interagency cooperation with the rest of the Southeast Asia countries. To this end, there is a need for policymakers to implement an NMSPOC in the country.

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